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THE DOUBLE DETECTIVE; or, THE MIDNIGHT MYSTERY.

A Romance of the Southland, of the Mysteries of New Orleans, and of the many men and many women of many lands who dwell in the Crescent City.

Nov. 10
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BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "GOLD DAN," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT," "VELVET HAND," ETC., ETC.



"MY EYES?" SCREAMED THE OLD TRAMP, IN DEADLY TERROR. "YES, I AM GOING TO PUT THEM OUT WITH THIS HOT IRON."

The Double Detective;

OR,
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BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "LA MARMOSSET," "JOE PHENIX,
THE POLICE SPY," "THE WOLVES OF NEW
YORK," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT,"
"OVERLAND KIT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MURDERED AT MIDNIGHT.

OUT on the still air of the night rung the shrill scream that told of mortal agony—out on the spicy breeze, perfumed with the fragrance of the orange blossoms, and the thousand and one scents given forth by the rich plants which in a tropical clime find a congenial home.

It is of "Orleans" that we write, the New Orleans of the English-speaking people but the *Orleans* of the native French Creoles, and the half-native Spaniards.

The scene, a superb plantation, some five miles south of the city, on the river's bank.

The mansion was an old-time one, built after the usual style common to the region, low and flat, covering a vast extent of ground, all verandas and glass, with a profusion of creeping vines, now in luxuriant blossom, for it was the balmy October time, when in the South all nature seems to smile.

The mansion was light and airy enough in its appearance to be a fairy palace, and the grounds which surrounded it, filled to profusion with all the glorious plants which flourish in the fertile soil of Louisiana, seemed like a bit taken bodily from the summer-land of the frisky elves.

In the distance gleamed the yellow waters of the great Mississippi, not yellow now though to the gaze, but rolling onward to their destination, the great Mexican Gulf, a perfect sheet of molten silver, thanks to the rays of a full, round moon hanging like a shield in the clear blue sky—a sky spangled with a myriad of twinkling stars.

All without was peace and rest, for it was the witching hour of night, but within the Southern palace was a scene of fearful agony.

A chamber upon the second story, with full-length windows, open to the floor and affording an easy passage to the promenade without upon the roof of the veranda, looking toward the west, commanding a view of the mighty river, but the view was broken here and there by lofty trees, live oaks, tulips and magnolias, which flourished so grandly in the fruitful soil.

It was a sleeping apartment—the apartment of a woman, too, for it was literally crowded with costly, dainty pieces of furniture, artistic odds and ends, little bits of finery and the rare trinkets, so dear to the heart of the well-bred, cultured woman.

And in the center of the apartment, struggling in the grasp of the grim destroyer, was a creature who seemed well fitted to reign as queen over this earthly paradise.

She was tall, superbly formed, with a face of rare beauty, and her flowing locks of golden hair, and wonderful blue eyes, one would travel far to see equaled.

Her dress, which was of satin and lace—an India satin, of uncertain hue, ashes of roses the nearest tint perhaps, one of those fabrics a Russian princess might wear, and but few other women hope to obtain—was a masterpiece from Paris, an evening dress which had never been surpassed in New Orleans, even by the gay Creole dames, with the proceeds of a thousand acres in sugar-cane to spend upon their persons.

The necklace of diamonds, clasped around her perfect throat, was such a one as an Indian Rajah might have gloried in possessing in the brave old days when the far East held all the riches of the world.

But, now, of what avail were all the cherished baubles of this life to the stricken woman, fighting with unnatural strength against the near approach of death?

The tiny knife-blade was in her neck, the weapon still in the wound—a toy such as a child would play with, but the death-stroke had been given with consummate skill—the slayer had known so exactly where to strike that the tiny wound had sapped the precious human life as surely as though a huge double-edged sword had been plunged through the heart.

Wildly beating the air with the superb arms, also adorned with bracelets of glittering diamonds, she staggered backward, the victim of a most foul deed.

Her glaring eyes, now fast becoming fixed, stared through the open casement.

Was it fancy, or did the dying woman see a stealthy form—so indistinct that it was almost

impossible to say whether it was man, woman or a shifting shadow of one of the ancient trees, as the limbs stirred gently in the night breeze—stealing along toward the river's bank?

A single scream only had escaped from her lips when the death-dealing steel had pierced her peerless neck, and then she had staggered back until her progress was stayed by the dressing-case—one of those marvelous carved beauties which the cunning French artisans alone seem to be capable of producing. Upon the marble slab she sunk and her head fell back against the glass wherein she had so often surveyed her proud beauty.

And in this position she was found by the startled guests who came crowding up the broad stairs from the parlors below, which had been ringing with the "merry sound of music and of dance," even at the very moment when the blow had been struck which had called forth the direful scream sounding loud and clear above all else.

The lady of the mansion had "received" her friends that night, and her ample parlors were filled with as goodly a company of "fair women and brave men" as the city of Orleans could boast.

At midnight she had excused herself that she might play the humble hostess and see that the viands for the refreshment of her guests were properly prepared, but instead of so doing, she had ascended to her apartment on the second story and there met her fate.

Strange was the scene presented when the gay couples, fresh from the joyous dance, came crowding into the apartment to be transfixed with horror at the fearful sight which met their eyes.

They huddled by the doorway, shrinking close together for mutual protection, as if some horrid spell was upon them.

Death in its most awful shape looked them in the face; they had eyes only for the terrible sight, which, like the fabled glare of the basilisk, seemed powerful enough to kill, but if any of them had chanced to gaze through the window into the garden, perchance a dark form might have been detected skulking there amid the luxuriant shrubbery.

For a few seconds only the suspense lasted, and then the spell was broken.

Foremost in the group was one of the best sons of the South, Colonel Lancelot Terrebonne, the "Beau-saber" of the famous Texan Tigers, as good and brave a soldier, and as fine a gentleman, as the land boasted.

The colonel was a man of eight-and-thirty, but so lightly did he wear his years he seemed more like a boy of twenty. Tall and straight, with regular features, olive complexion, black hair and eyes, he was a perfect type of the Creole race of Louisiana.

He was the first to find his tongue.

"For Heaven's sake, ladies, retire!" he exclaimed. "This is no sight for your eyes to witness."

And then, as if the stricken woman had caught the sense of the words, with a low moan she slid from the support of the dressing-case to the floor, doubling all up in a shapeless mass.

With screams of horror the ladies fled, some of them so overcome by the dreadful sight which they had witnessed that they could hardly find strength to descend the stairs.

"Ride for a doctor immediately some one of you!" the colonel cried. "Gerard's plantation is the third one above; the chances are that you will find him at home, for he rarely keeps late hours; I know he generally leaves the city about ten o'clock. He will probably be in bed but you must get him up; he will come when he understands how urgent is the need."

"I will go," responded one of the young men, "for my horse is all ready; I was only waiting to take my leave of Mrs. Esperance when this dreadful tragedy took place," and then he hurried away.

"Gentlemen, may I call upon some of you to assist in placing this unfortunate lady upon the bed?" the colonel asked, "and if some one will have the kindness to call the maids."

Ready hands were there for the task, for many of the gentlemen had become used to blood and slaughter, having seen enough of it upon a dozen well-fought fields during the great Civil War, for in the group were men who had faced each other as deadly enemies, wearing either gray or blue.

Some one suggested that the little knife, still sticking in the wound, might be removed, but the colonel objected.

"No, no, gentlemen, we had better leave everything as it is until the doctor comes. We cannot do anything to relieve her, for I have stood by too many death-beds not to know that this unfortunate lady is far beyond all mortal help. You can see for yourselves, gentlemen; death already has set its seal upon her."

"But who could have done this fearful deed?" asked another one of the party. "Do you not think it is a case of suicide?"

"I think not; a murder, most undoubtedly, for no woman would have had the strength and the determination to drive the knife so deeply into the neck," replied the colonel; "and that

reminds me we are losing valuable time. Let us at once examine the grounds and see if we cannot discover some traces of the assassin."

The idea was a good one and immediately was carried into execution.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCE.

SOFTLY the gentlemen withdrew from the apartment, their spirits sobered by the sight they had seen, and in a body they proceeded to the lower floor.

At the foot of the stairs were clustered the two pretty quadroon maids of Mrs. Esperance and the darker-hued negress, Cleo, the housekeeper of the mansion.

The girls were trembling with apprehension and chattering at a great rate after the fashion of their class, while the matronly Cleopatra was endeavoring to repress their "foolishness," as she termed it.

"Hus' yer noise, yer coffee-colored idiots!" she cried, reprovingly. "You done t'ink de house is on fire, dat you chatter like a lot of jay birds in de woods?"

Then as the gentlemen descended the stairs, she scanned their faces eagerly, and at once comprehended from the grave expressions upon them that some untoward event had happened.

She dropped a low "curtsey" and asked:

"Lord sakes! massas, w'at am de matter?"

"Your mistress, Cleo, needs your assistance," replied Terrebonne, who was well acquainted with the negress.

"W'at's de matter—has she fainted?" but even as she put the question, with the quick instinct of her race she guessed that something far more serious had happened.

"Your mistress is dying—she has been murdered."

Loud wails instantly arose from the two maids, and Cleo for a moment was dazed by the shock; but she was an old servant and a good one and her training soon showed itself.

"Will you done quit yer noise?" she cried to the sobbing girls. "We had better go to her, hadn't we, massa?" she asked.

"Yes, and irstantly; but come, gentlemen, we are losing time and while we dally here the wretch who has done this horrid deed will have ample opportunity to escape."

The gentlemen secured their hats and went forth into the garden. Although all of them had come that evening on pleasure intent, so usual is the custom of carrying arms in the South-west that there was hardly a person in the party who did not possess a weapon; so there was no doubt of their ability to subdue the assassin if they succeeded in coming upon him.

After the departure of the men, Cleo had a stormy time with the two girls, for at first they declared that on no account would they dare to go up-stairs and enter the chamber of death, but at last by means of threats—she declared she would tell massa kurnel and they would both be locked up in the calaboose if they didn't go—the negress succeeded in getting the two to accompany her.

But, when she stood by the bedside and looked upon the stricken woman the practiced eyes of Cleo saw that her mistress was far past all human aid; the beautiful limbs were already growing cold. Death indeed had come.

Awe-stricken the girls looked upon the shocking sight; all had seen death before but never in such fearful shape.

"It's no use; we can't do noffing hyer; she's done gone, honies, de good Lor' rest her soul!" Cleo observed. "All dat we kin do is to jes' sit hyer and watch till de doctor and de gemmens come. It won't do fur to go and leave her alone for she's a heap of jewelry and some of dem pore black trash from de kitchen might steal inter de house and help demselves. De good Lor' hab mercy on us!" the negress cried, suddenly; "w'at has become ob de diamonds?"

THE DIAMONDS!

They were gone!

The precious string of gems, as fine as the beaux and belles of New Orleans had ever seen, necklace and bracelets, were not now on the person of the dead woman!

That Mrs. Esperance had worn them when she had gone up-stairs Cleo was certain, for she had exchanged words with her mistress upon the landing below, and had—with all the love of her half-savage race for finery—looked with admiring eyes upon the sparkling jewels.

"Mebbe, some ob de gemmens done took dem off—de kurnel, p'haps?" Virgie, the eldest of the maids, suggested.

"Mebbe, mebbe;" but Cleo shook her head as though she did not have much belief in this theory.

The doctor soon came.

Maximilian Gerard was a character in his way; an old young man; he had run through a splendid fortune immediately upon attaining his majority and being put in possession of it. All had been squandered except his landed estates, which a prudent father had so tied up that they could not be disposed of. As a youth he had studied medicine, more as an amusement and because it afforded him ample opportunities

to go on unlimited sprees than for any other purpose, but when his health became ruined by his violent excesses, and the last of his ready cash disappeared, he awoke to the consciousness that in the future he must get his living by his own exertions; and so, in spite of his own ideas about the matter, he had to take to the only profession of which he had any knowledge. He reformed entirely, and in a very short time built up an excellent practice, for he really possessed rare abilities as a professor of the healing art.

By the time the doctor arrived the guests had finished their search in the garden, which had been fruitless, and had returned to the house.

All gathered by the bedside when the doctor approached.

At the first glance the medical man shook his head; it did not require the skill of a Galen to tell that all mortal aid was useless in this case.

"She is dead, gentlemen," he announced, "and all the doctors in the world couldn't bring her back to life again."

He was already in possession of all the facts, as the messenger who had been dispatched had told him all that was known in regard to the affair as they rode toward the plantation.

"What do you think about it? Is it possible that it is a suicide?" Terrebonne asked.

"I think not," and the doctor surveyed the body with a critical eye; "it does not seem so to me; if it is, the lady has made the most determined and successful attempt that I ever heard of. The coroner should be sent for without delay, and until he comes the body must not be disturbed."

"A strange weapon, doctor," the colonel remarked, directing the other's attention to the tiny instrument which had so speedily sapped the life of the beautiful woman; "it is only a penknife."

"It is a lancet, I think, from the looks of it," the doctor replied. "And whoever used it knew exactly where to strike to inflict a mortal wound. That is why I do not think this is a case of self destruction. A woman would not be apt to have a lancet, and if she did possess one, she must have considerable knowledge of the human form divine to inflict with a single stab such a deadly wound."

Then Terrebonne happened to notice the absence of the diamonds from the neck and wrists.

"Hallo!" he cried, "what has become of the necklace and bracelets? why did you remove them?" he demanded, addressing the servants.

"Deed, massa kurnel, we neber touched a t'ing!" the negress protested.

"No, sah; we neber touched dem at all!" the girls cried in chorus.

"What does this mean?" Terrebonne asked, turning to the rest. He believed the servants spoke the truth, as also did all the others.

"What is it?" asked the doctor.

"Why, when we came to Mrs. Esperance's assistance, alarmed by her scream, we found her struggling in the agonies of death, and decked with her costly jewels, exactly as she had been when she quitted the parlors below—diamonds, doctor, worth a good many thousand dollars."

"I have heard of them." The doctor had been rather partial to diamonds himself at one time in his career, and was reputed to be an excellent judge.

"She wore the jewels when we placed her on the bed just before we hurried into the garden in search of the assassin. Is that not so, gentlemen?"

The rest confirmed the assertion, for one and all had noticed the costly gems.

"And now they are gone."

"The murder was evidently committed for the purpose of robbing her of the jewels; your prompt arrival, alarmed by her outcry, forced the assassin to seek concealment in the room here somewhere, and when you went to seek for him without, he improved the opportunity to plunder his victim and then escape," the doctor observed.

That this theory was correct there hardly seemed a doubt, and it was immediately proposed to search the mansion from ground to garret, although, as the doctor remarked, it was a great deal like locking the stable door after the horse was stolen, for the assassin had been afforded ample time to escape.

The programme was carried out, but not the slightest clew to the assassin was found.

In due time the coroner came; a jury was summoned and the examination began.

No evidence, however, in regard to the death beyond what we have detailed was produced.

The fatal weapon was a physician's lancet, a new one, never having apparently been used.

Small clew this to the doer of the deed.

The murder created great excitement in the city; the newspapers were full of it, particularly as the assassin, seemingly, had planned his horrid work so well that detection was almost impossible.

So great was the interest created by the crime that even the supine officials of the city were moved to action, and a reward of five hundred dollars was offered for information leading to the capture of the assassin.

Murder will out, they say; and yet there are some murders so mysterious that the Judgment Day alone will bring the truth to light.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

FROM the riverside plantation to a stately mansion situated in the most fashionable quarter of New Orleans, let us transport the reader.

The mansion was the home of one of the most eminent men of the city. Few citizens of the Crescent City could hold up their heads with Judge Erasmus Clairborne.

The scion of one of the oldest and most distinguished of Southern families, the judge, in his career from youth to ripe old age, had done nothing but reflect credit upon the ancient name.

As student, lawyer, soldier, and judge, he had equally distinguished himself, and now, retired from the active duties of his profession, he employed himself in the care of his large estates, distributed through all parts of the country, for the judge was not only interested in sugar-cane and cotton farms in Louisiana, Alabama, and up the "Red," but also in mining matters in the Far West, to say nothing of an occasional speculation in stocks in the New York market.

In person, the judge was tall, massive in build, with a lion-like head, fringed with iron-gray hair, and lit up by a pair of most thoughtful gray eyes.

The judge was a very young old man, for though he was nearly sixty years of age, yet the gray hair was the only visible sign of the flight of time, and that was not really due to time, either, for he had been just about as gray ever since his thirtieth year, when he was prostrated, when on a trip up the Red river, by the terrible malarial fever common to that region.

He was as straight as a pine tree, as agile as the ordinary man of thirty, and for strength, few men in the city, young or old, could at all compare with him.

Two living relatives only had the judge—his son, Raymond Clairborne, a young man of twenty-two, and his cousin, three times removed; a beautiful girl, by name Philippa Lauderdale. She was from the Mississippi branch of the family, but all her kindred dying in her childhood, she had come into the care of the judge until she should attain her majority, bearing the heiress of great wealth.

The judge sat in his library in the great armchair, his hands clasped, and his head bent forward in profound thought.

The clock upon the mantle struck one, and the sound roused the thinker from his reverie and caused him to turn his eyes toward the window, through which the moonbeams shone.

"He is late. Will he never come? Must my vigil last until the light of dawn streaks the eastern skies?" he murmured.

But, even as he spoke, faintly to his ears came the clang of the great front door of the house, closing.

"It is he, at last," the judge mused.

He moved his chair nearer to the table, turned up the drop-light upon it, which had been burning but dimly, hardly a rival for the moonbeams streaming in through the window so freely, and then settled himself in his chair.

Barely had he done so when the door opened and into the apartment came a handsome young fellow, tall in stature, well-proportioned, with golden-brown hair, and piercing brown-black eyes—enough like the judge, both in form and feature, to have convinced any one, at first sight, of the relationship between them.

This was Raymond Clairborne, the judge's only child, two-and-twenty years of age, a medical student, and reputed to be the brightest man in the class.

"Julius was waiting in the hall, father, and he told me that you wished to see me before I went to bed," he said.

"You keep late hours, my son," the father remarked, with a glance at the clock.

"Yes, sir, it is late," the son replied, following with his eyes the glance of his father and noting the time; then, with a petulant air, he flung himself into the chair which the judge had pushed toward him. "I suppose I might say I have been detained at the college, or have been burning midnight oil in deep researches as to what the old masters of the craft thought of medicine, but it is not the truth, and so I will not say it."

"And what is the truth? Where have you been? Don't answer," added the judge, hastily, "if you think I am pushing you too far."

"Oh, no, father; there is no reason why I should make a mystery of the matter. I have been down the river road to spend a social evening with a lady."

"Mrs. Esperance?"

"The same; you are a shrewd guesser, father," the youth replied, with heightened color.

"I did not guess at it; I was told at the club to-night that she gave a party and that you had signified your intention of attending."

"There are busybodies, go where you will, who find nothing better to do than to discuss their neighbors' affairs!" Raymond exclaimed, evidently annoyed.

"My dear boy, the acts of such women as Mrs. Esperance are always noted and commented upon, and it is not strange that those who associate with her should also be subject to remarks."

"You speak as if Mrs. Esperance did not bear the best of reputations," the son observed, a slight frown upon his handsome face.

"I speak as the world speaks. Do you remember the story of Circe?"

"No, I do not exactly; she was a dangerous woman, I believe."

"Yes, a woman as beautiful as an angel and as dangerous as a fiend. She entrapped and ruined all foolish mortals who were fascinated by her smiles."

"And is Mrs. Esperance a Circe, then?"

"If she is not, what is she?"

"Father, you are playing the game of the French courts and throwing the burden of proof upon my shoulders. You should prove that she is a siren, not I that she is not."

"The question I put to you is a simple one and no unfair advantage is meant to be taken. Who and what is Mrs. Esperance?"

"A very beautiful woman!" The answer was given in a spirit of banter and yet the keen-eyed judge could easily detect an undercurrent of melancholy.

"So I have heard," the father responded, dryly, "but on that point I am in no need of information, for the woman who can turn the brain of such a boy as you must be both beautiful and fascinating."

Again the shade came over Raymond's face and a troubled look appeared in his eyes.

"She is a very wealthy widow, a native of Georgia, but married when quite a girl to a Frenchman, old enough to be her father, whose wealth was the sole attraction; the match was arranged by her parents and she consented, knowing no better."

"Yes, yes; the old story: I have heard it a hundred times at least. She married a man for his money when she was so young that she really did not know what love was; he dies; she is left a rich widow and now she thinks, possibly, she will meet some congenial soul who will be able to show her what true love is. That is the tale, is it not, stripped of all the ornaments of speech with which the e jades deck their utterances?"

The son was astonished; he had seldom seen his father so moved.

"I believe, sir, that is something after the fashion of her talk."

"And, if my suspicion is not incorrect, this woman of forty—"

"Oh, my dear father, you wrong her; she is not an hour over twenty-five or six."

"Bah! forty if she is a day! I know the tribe well; if she owns to twenty-five it means that she is from thirty-eight to forty. These female furies, disguised as angels, never own to within ten or fifteen years of their age. Well, as I said, this woman has selected you for a prey. She is cunning; she has pushed her inquiries cautiously and she has learned enough to convince her that one of these days you will be a wealthy man, and as you are the wealthiest and best favored of all the butterflies whom her garish light has attracted she has graciously pleased to smile upon you."

"Wealth can have very little influence upon a woman so well situated in regard to this world's goods as Mrs. Esperance."

"You believe the tale she tells of her riches?"

"I believe the evidence of my own eyes; the diamonds she wears alone are worth a fortune."

"And are you a judge of diamonds? Get the lady to lend you a single stone some time; then go to some of the Jews in the city and see what you can get for it. Our Hebrew citizens have keen eyes for diamonds, and the stone that you or I will accept as a jewel of the first water—an old mine stone, five hundred years old—they will laugh at as a bit of rubbish, fit only to catch fools."

"I can hardly believe it can be the truth; they are diamonds beyond doubt."

"Try it and you will be convinced. But you will not try it, for—she will not permit you. She will not dare to let the assumed jewel go out of her possession, no matter if you offer to deposit with her thrice the value. She is an adventuress—a fraud—an impostor; she has nothing but her beautiful face and form—a fine capital, though, when used to advantage."

"I think you wrong her, but it does not matter now," Raymond observed, with rather a sullen air.

"Oh, but I do not wrong her as you will find in time."

"Perhaps not," and the mind of the youth seemed to be far away as he uttered the words.

"I have hesitated for quite a time to approach this matter, for the subject is a delicate one even between father and son, but I cannot see you become the prey of a scheming adventuress without doing all I can to avert the evil. Your honor, too, is at stake—your cousin, Philippa."

Here a deep sigh came from the lips of the young man.

"Ah, well may you sigh, for if you go on, you will ruin the life of the most glorious girl

that breathes the air of earth. It has been understood for years that you and she were to be married upon her attaining her majority. I know that she has looked upon the matter as settled; you know yourself she has never permitted the visits of any other suitor."

"Lance Terrebonne comes here quite frequently, though."

"The colonel is an old friend of the family; he is almost old enough, too, to be the girl's father; besides, he is penniless and with his reckless, scapegrace ways he would never dare to think of lifting his eyes to such an heiress as Philippa."

"He is the boldest rider, the best shot, the finest dancer, and the most finished gentleman in the State, and if he were to enter the lists against me I could not have a more dangerous rival."

"There is no chance of that," the judge said, impatiently, as though he disliked the interruption. "But think of Philippa; suppose she should learn *she* has a rival in your affections in the person of this Mrs. Esperance! She comes of a hot-headed family; her mother was once obliged to leave boarding-school for having boxed the ears of a teacher who presumed to doubt her word, and the woman, who was big enough to eat her, was so awed by the little Southern spitfire, that she did not dare to resent the affront. It is in the girl's nature to take upon herself the righting of her wrongs if the facts come to her knowledge. Think what a terrible scene would ensue and the scandal that would arise if she should seek this Mrs. Esperance."

"Say no more, father; I have paid my last visit to Mrs. Esperance's mansion; of my own free will I shall never look upon her face again."

"When did you arrive at this decision?"

"To-night. The party was still going on when I came away; I left the house a quarter to twelve."

"And did you part from Mrs. Esperance on friendly terms?"

"No; she was not pleased, but she told me I would surely come again; I said I would not, and then broke off and came away."

"It is far better the acquaintance should end now than be continued. Now, my boy, let me counsel you to lose no time in arranging matters with Philippa; bind yourself to her as firmly as you can, and it will give you strength to fight against the fascinations of this enchantress if she is not satisfied to let you go. Good-night; I shall sleep better knowing you are free from this Siren's power."

Both father and son rose; they clasped hands, and as they did so, the judge caught sight of a tiny speck which looked like blood upon one of the shirt-cuffs of his son.

"What is that, *blood*?" he asked, visibly agitated.

"I am troubled at times with blood dropping from my nose, and a drop, I presume, has fallen upon the cuff."

Raymond answered readily enough, but there was a strange, abstracted look in his eyes.

"You should be more careful; blood-stains are ugly things sometimes."

And so the two parted.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SOUTHERN GIRL.

THE scene which we have just described was rather a strange one, but one stranger still took place in the Clairborne mansion, about half an hour previous.

The house, as we have said, was in one of the most fashionable quarters of the city—an old-style mansion, built originally by a rich Creole planter for his winter residence, and surrounded by an elaborately planned garden.

In the rear of the house were the stables and the servants' quarters.

The judge, although rather partial to late hours himself, was extremely strict in regard to his servants being in bed at a proper time, and so, by ten o'clock at night, all lights were generally extinguished, except in the judge's apartments.

Philippa, the heiress, was also a model girl in respect to her hours, and usually retired about ten. On this evening of which we write, she had bidden the judge good-night at the usual hour and gone to her own apartments, which were in the rear of the mansion, looking out upon the back garden. The stables and servants' quarters were to the right of the house and shaded from observation by a hedge of palmetto trees.

Philippa had her own maid and man; also her own horses, and generally did about as she pleased, for it was a very light rein indeed the judge held over his beautiful ward. He trusted her most implicitly, and with good reason, for since she had been under his care never had there been a more docile or lovable ward.

Great then would have been the judge's astonishment, if, while watching for the return of his son, he had kept his eye upon the carriageway and had seen a horseman enter the garden at about half an hour after midnight.

We say a horseman, for such the rider ap-

peared to be at a first glance, but a close scrutiny would have revealed that the rider was the heiress, Philippa, masquerading in male attire.

But the judge's library was on the other side of the house, and did not command a view of the carriageway.

At the entrance Philippa dismounted and carefully opened the iron gate wide enough to admit the horse, and then closed it again with the same caution, after the animal passed.

The steed was a pretty, light-stepping beast—a cross between an Indian pony and a Texan mustang, jet-black in hue, with a white blaze in the forehead, and two white hind feet; an odd-colored animal, and one which once seen was not apt to be forgotten.

As gentle as a kitten, and obedient to the slightest touch of its mistress's hand—wonderfully sagacious, too, the animal followed the disguised girl up the gravelled way as though he understood the need of caution, and trod so lightly that the sound of his steps had not even reached the ears of the negro, the judge's own man, Julius, who watched for "young massa's return," within the main entry.

At the stables all was dark; not a light was visible; every door was securely locked, to all outward appearance, but upon the girl's cautious summons:

"Pomp!"

A likely-looking "yellow boy" made his appearance from a sheltered nook where he had been dozing in the shade of the palmetto hedge.

"Hyer I is, missie!"

"You have the key to the stable?"

"Yes, missie; I done tol' old Pete dat I would tend to shettin' up to-night."

"Did any one miss the horse?"

"No, missie; no, indeedy, you don't catch any of dem lazy 'coons settin' foot in de stable unless dey have to."

"Very good; put Pepper away, then, give him a little water, and a good rubbing down, for I have ridden him rather hard."

That this was the truth the spots of foam still upon the animal's bit clearly proved.

"Deed, missie, yo have, an' de hoss is sweatin', too, sure as yer born!"

"He's not hurt; he doesn't get half exercise enough; rub him down well, that is all."

"Yes, m'mum," and the negro took the horse by the bridle and led him toward the stable, but when a few steps away a cry of alarm escaped from his lips.

"Oh, missie!"

"What is the matter—what ails you? Do you wish to wake all the servants by crying out in that fashion?" the girl demanded, angrily, yet barely speaking above a breath.

"But, missie, dar's blood on de rein!"

"The horse has scratched himself somewhere, that is all," the lady answered, apparently irritated by the remark.

"Yes, missie," but the groom shook his head, doubtfully, as he looked at the sable skin of the steed, unscarred by mark or hurt of any kind.

"Hold your tongue about it! Mind, not a word!" Philippa exclaimed, then turned away and walked toward the house, while the yellow boy led the horse into the stable, where he took particular care to remove the stain which disfigured the rein.

"Say nuffin'," he muttered; "no, indeedy! dar is nebber no good comes a-talkin' 'bout sick tings."

The lady entered the house by the side door, a key to which she possessed, and then, by means of the rear staircase, ascended to her own apartments.

Dinah, her maid, a pretty octoroon almost as white as her mistress, was in waiting, and as she expressed no astonishment upon beholding her mistress in the strange garb in which she masqueraded, it was clear she was in the secret.

The girl's eyes were heavy with sleep, and it was apparent she had had great difficulty in keeping awake.

"Bress de lam'! Miss Philippa, if I ain't right glad to see you home!" she exclaimed, as she closed the door behind her mistress, then carefully locked and bolted it. "Yes, indeedy, I's jes' been on pins and needles all de time dat you have been gone for fear ole massa take it inter his head fur to want to see you fur somet'ng."

"Very little danger of such an event; but come, help me to remove this miserable dress; it has served its purpose now, and I hope I will never see it again. You must take it away and burn it or bury it, or throw it into the river; hide it from the sight of every one!"

The girl was greatly excited, her face was deadly pale, the full lips, exquisitely shaped, and which were usually so ruby red, were almost devoid of color, while the black eyes were flashing and the superb bosom heaving with agitation.

Dinah had never seen her mistress in such a state before, and much she wondered.

The girl threw off the broad-brimmed hat, and then proceeded to remove the coat. The maid, hastening to assist her, stopped abruptly with a shrill cry.

"What is the matter? Why do you cry out

like that, you idiot? Do you want to alarm the household?"

"Oh, Miss Philippa, dar's blood on yer han'!" the girl wailed.

"What a fool you are! Did you never see a drop of blood before—did you never scratch yourself with a pin?" Philippa demanded, angrily, and tearing off the gloves which had incased her white and delicate hands, she threw them at the maid, in a fit of passion.

The girl caught them deftly, and as it happened her eyes fell upon the left-hand glove which was stained with blood, and, in that part of the glove which, when worn, covers the upper right-hand side of the palm, were seven little cuts, four on the upper side and three on the lower.

"Why, jes' look hyer, missie!" cried the girl, "doesn't de glove look fur all de world jes' as if some one had bin a-bitin' yer?"

"Nonsense! In the darkness I rode too near a palmetto tree and the thorns scratched my hand; that is all there is to it; and, hark ye! keep your own counsel about the matter; no idle gossip about my scratched hand, or the torn glove, or of my mad freak to-night if you value my esteem."

"Deed, missie, guess I wouldn't say a word 'bout any ob dem fur de world!" replied the octoroon, with an offended air, hurt by the suspicion that there was any doubt about her fidelity to the mistress whom she had served since she was a child and with whom she had grown up.

"Swear it!" cried Philippa, with sudden and angry vehemence. "You are a church member—you believe that there is a hereafter, and that breaking a solemn oath will peril your soul and doom you to everlasting fires!"

"Ye—yes, missie!" mumbled the maid, terrified by the fierceness of her mistress, usually so even-tempered and so gentle.

"Down on your knees then and swear!"

And the little hand upon the shoulder of the girl, forcing her to the floor, felt like a hand of iron.

"Swear, by all your hopes of a blissful hereafter—as you trust to be saved from the eternal torments of the lost souls exposed forever to the flames, that you will never reveal to any one, no matter how near or dear to you, your knowledge of what has taken place this night, and if you break the oath may your lost soul forever burn—"

"Don't, missie, don't!" cried the girl, in terror; "don't say any more, fur goodness' sake! You make me all goose-flesh! No, indeedy, I'll neber luff a word go from me—not a single word!"

"Be sure you keep the promise. What has occurred to-night must be securely locked in our own breasts," and the girl paced the floor, trembling with agitation.

The octoroon rose slowly to her feet.

"Deed, missie, I t'ink dat you are jes' right 'bout dat. Why, w'at would old massa say if he should find out dat you were out at dis hyer time of night and wid dat sort of clothes on? and young massa, too, w'at wouldn't he say?" and the girl threw her hands up in horror at the idea. "Why, he would jest go crazy, fur sure, 'cos he loves de very ground dat you walks on!"

"Does he?" and a strange expression passed over Philippa's face.

"Yes, indeedy! Dar isn't any doubt 'bout dat!"

"Do you believe that?"

"Why, ob course, missie!"

"It may be true; at all events I am his *now*, if he wants me; there is no barrier between us *now*. Forgetting all maidenly reserve, at one bold stroke I have dared as few women dare in this world even for the man they love. It is over now, and in the future—Ah! what will come in the future?—I dare not think of that, for what horrid images rise before me! Come, get me to bed and give me some wine that I may drug myself into forgetfulness!"

Never before had the girl seen her mistress in such a state.

She got her undressed and in bed as soon as possible.

What dark mystery did the disjointed utterances cover?

CHAPTER V.

THE AVENGER.

UP the broad yellow stream of the Mississippi came a small, ugly-looking sloop one morning; the wind was light, the craft a bad sailer at the best of times, and on the present occasion she was barely making four knots an hour, having to encounter the full strength of the current.

At last she came to anchor in the middle of the stream; a boat put off, containing a lady and a single oarsman, and soon made a landing at the levee.

The lady gained the shore and then addressed the boatman:

"I thank you, sir, for the courtesy with which I have been treated, but for your employers I have only words of bitterest contempt," she said, in tones singularly sweet and yet remarkably decided. "When you return to them tell them from me that they have made

one great mistake—a mistake which will cost them dearly in the future. When they had me in their power, they should have killed me—they never should have allowed me to escape with life, for with the revolving of the endless wheel of time I shall return and exact full satisfaction for all the wrongs which I have suffered at their hands."

"I hope, madam, that you will hold me blameless," the man replied, touching his hat, respectfully. "I know nothing of the merits of the quarrel, but was engaged simply to bring you to New Orleans, and I trust that if you have been wronged you will be able to revenge yourself."

Then again the man bowed and pulled out into the stream.

At the point where the lady had landed the levee was covered with freight, cotton-bales and boxes of all shapes and sizes, a regular barricade ten feet high, completely sheltering any one on the water side from the gaze of the passers by on the upper part of the levee.

The lady sat down upon a convenient box and gazed wistfully out upon the surface of the shining river.

She was a woman with a remarkable face, her features irregular and very strongly marked, yet, on the whole, the face was beautiful, for there were life, soul and wonderful expression in it. She was plainly and neatly dressed.

Despite the air of resolution there was a mournful look in the dark eyes as she looked upon the boat making its way to the craft, saw the man ascend to the deck and then watched the sloop trip its anchor, get under way and descend the river.

"There goes the last link that binds me to the land of Florida," she murmured, as the sloop glided down the stream, making far better progress now than when she had fought her way up against the current. "Shall I ever be able to return there and wreak my vengeance upon these wretches who have despoiled me? I have sworn that I will, but brave words in this world are not always followed by brave deeds. The means may be wanting, and at present, instead of being able to command money to execute deeds of vengeance, I am in need of coin whereby to purchase food to sustain life and the shelter of a roof to house me from the weather. Alone in New Orleans, without a friend or even an acquaintance in the city and only a single five-dollar gold piece in my pocket. Hard lines indeed! But I always have wrung a living from the world and it will be strange indeed if I fail to find a way to gain my bread now."

And while the woman was engaged in these gloomy meditations, a well-dressed gentleman, of middle age, and with that peculiar air about him that to the practiced eye indicates the son of Albion's isle, seated upon a cotton-bale just around the corner of the miscellaneous pile, was busy musing aloud after the fashion of his fair neighbor, of whose proximity, however, he was not aware, for from the position which he occupied, the point at which the boat had landed was concealed from his view by the pile of freight that intervened.

In person the gentleman was a stalwart specimen of humanity, rather portly in build, with florid complexion, blue eyes, flaxen hair and the extravagant mutton-chop side-whiskers, so dear to the heart of the traveling Briton.

In his hand he held a newspaper, and he had just finished perusing a long and circumstantial account of the murder of Adeline Esperance.

"By Jove! this is too bad!" he muttered, as he raised his eyes from the paper and gazed thoughtfully out upon the surface of the sunlit river. "To think that I have traveled nearly all over the civilized world in search of this woman, and now at last, when I have run her to earth in this corner of the New World, I arrive just in time to read of her death! Well, well, and after what I had looked forward to with so many joyous anticipations, too." And a deep sigh escaped him. "And she, poor soul, to be snatched from the world just as I was hastening on the wings of love after these years of separation, fully provided with everything to make life enjoyable. Well, she is dead, and now, what shall I do? She has been murdered—murdered for her jewels, evidently, and these blind bats of policemen plainly have not the least clew to the criminal; there was probably only one, for, as a rule, in these desperate crimes, the slayer has no confederates. Why not devote the rest of my life, if it should take so long, and the money which I brought to shower like water upon her, to hunting down the murderer? The idea is an excellent one!" And the Englishman rubbed his hands together briskly. "It will give me occupation, and I shall take a mournful pleasure in thinking that if the assassin with his murderous steel has deprived me of the bliss of once again holding my darling in my arms, I shall be even with him when I tighten the hangman's noose around his neck. Poor Adeline! I designed to place you upon a pinnacle from which you could look down upon the average lady, even of London society, with scorn; but since I cannot do that, I will devote myself to hunting down and giv-

ing to justice the base villain whose merciless steel snatched you so rudely from this world. But, where shall I find assistants?" he muttered, as he rose to his feet, and, despite the strong excitement under which he was laboring, folded the newspaper in the most methodical way. "These fellows here in the city who call themselves policemen and detectives are evidently of no account. Oh, what wouldn't I give for a couple of good men from Scotland Yard, or a brace of those keen-scented French detectives—those police spies who never tire until they have bagged their game!"

And with the closing word the Englishman walked around the corner of the pile of freight and came face to face with the woman, who rose at his approach.

A gasp of astonishment came from the Englishman. "Great Caesar! is it possible? La Marmoset!" he cried, and immediately he adjusted his eyeglasses upon his nose as though he doubted that he had seen aright.

"Well, well! Of all the coincidences in the world! Why, you were just in my thoughts."

"Ah, you remember me," and she smiled—that peculiar, bewitching smile which had proved fatal to so many. It was evident the other was no stranger to her.

"Ah, mademoiselle, one who has ever enjoyed the pleasure of your acquaintance would never be apt to forget the circumstance," he replied, with a gallant bow.

"Possibly the conditions under which we met may have had something to do with keeping the circumstance fresh in your memory."

"Very true; I see you remember all about it, and that is remarkable, for I suppose in the course of your wonderful career a hundred similar incidents have occurred; but it was a marvelous experience to me. Inveigled into that den of cut-throats, I was completely at their mercy. I am a tolerably strong man, and, like the majority of my countrymen, possess a good knowledge of the manly art of self-defense, yet I confess I shrunk from an encounter with the rascals; but you burst in upon them like a thunderbolt; never did I see a mortal in this world use fists so vigorously and so effectually withal. Mademoiselle, you cannot be French by birth; no Gaul ever yet knew enough to stand up and hit out from the shoulder in the superb fashion in which you did."

"No, I am an American."

"That accounts for it; in the last few years the sons of the New World have proved to the mother country that the race has in no ways degenerated. But, mademoiselle, excuse the question, what brings you to this country—public business?"

"No, I am no longer in the service."

"But, mademoiselle, are you free to act?" asked the Englishman, trembling with excitement.

"As a detective?"

"Yes."

"I am, and glad would I be for a chance."

"You have it, on the instant, and at your own figures. Read!" And, taking the journal from his pocket, he directed her attention to the account of the mysterious murder.

"Will you undertake the task—will you hunt down and bring to justice the murderer of this unfortunate woman? Name your own price for the service; draw freely on me for any sum you may require for expenses. Fortune smiled on me a year ago. No longer a poor captain with barely enough pay to live on, I am now, by the death of my three elder brothers, the head of my house: Sir John Pakingham, now, with one of the richest estates in England."

"But, I do not understand; I do not like to work in the dark. What interest have you in this woman, evidently French, by her name?"

"She was of mixed nationality—her mother Spanish, and her father a Russian noble of high degree; her birth and life alike a romance. But you shall know all. She was my wife. I fell madly in love and married her in Paris, where I met her while on a visit. The marriage was a secret one, for I feared my father's anger. One blissful year, and then I was obliged to return to England; my letters to her miscarried; false friends came between us; she believed I had betrayed and then deserted her, and in despair she fled. I tried to trace her and the moment I came into my property I devoted myself to the task. I find her at last; she is dead, but I will be the avenger. Will you aid me?"

"I will, and if I do not succeed it will be because my wits are gone!" she answered.

CHAPTER VI. ON THE SCENT.

JUDGE CLAIRBORNE sat in his office, which was situated in the lower part of Canal street, busy with his legal papers, when the colored servant bore in a card with the announcement that the gentleman who waited without desired a private interview with Judge Clairborne on important business. This was two days after Mrs. Esperance's murder.

"FELIX HOUMA,
Attorney-at-Law."

Such the inscription the card bore, and the judge repeated the name, reflectively.

"Houma—Houma?" he mused; "the name certainly seems familiar to me, and yet I cannot remember where I have ever met any one by that name. Show him in, though."

The judge's interests were so large and so varied that it was almost impossible for him to keep the run of all with whom he had dealings.

The visitor entered, and the judge surveying him with the calm, clear eyes, so piercing that they seemed to read a man's very thoughts, saw that Felix Houma was a young gentleman, a little under the medium size, with dark complexion, dark eyes and hair, and a smoothly-shaven face, rather effeminate in its cast; he was carefully dressed in complete black, patent-leather boots, kid gloves, and silk hat; in fact, so carefully was he attired that he looked exactly as if he had stepped out of a bandbox, and as he entered the room the air was heavy with the perfume with which he had so plentifully scented himself.

"A Creole dandy," thought the judge, as he scrutinized his visitor.

"Have I your permission, sah, to be seated?" asked the gentleman, assuming a graceful attitude and bowing. The voice was a peculiar one, a trifle harsh, and with an odd sort of intonation, which affected Clairborne unpleasantly.

"Certainly, sir, if your business requires time for its dispatch."

"I think it does, but I am not sure, sah; in this world it is never wise to be sure of anything," and then the speaker dropped gracefully into a convenient chair.

A slight shade came over Clairborne's face; already he had taken a dislike to his visitor.

"If you will have the kindness to state your business, sir," he said. "I am rather pressed for time to-day."

"Certainly, I will proceed at once. I presume there isn't any danger of our conversation being overheard?" and the visitor looked around him as if he expected to catch an eavesdropper hidden away somewhere.

"Not the slightest danger, sir." The judge was sitting at his desk, and he leaned back in his chair in an impatient sort of way.

"I have come to see you about this Adeline Esperance case," remarked the other, mysteriously.

Clairborne's face plainly showed his amazement at this abrupt and unexpected announcement.

First he straightened up in his chair, and then he leaned forward and resting an arm on the desk, looked earnestly into the face of the other.

"You have come to see me about this Adeline Esperance case?" he repeated, as though unable to believe that he had heard correctly.

"Yes, sah."

"But I do not understand—"

"What interest you can have in it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, in order to explain that I must first explain what my interest is in the matter."

"If you will be so kind."

"As you have probably noticed by my card, I am a lawyer."

"Yes."

"But I have never had the pleasure of meeting you personally."

"No, I think not," and Clairborne's keen eyes were searching the face of the other as though he was still a judge upon the bench and the visitor was a criminal being tried for his life.

But not in the least did the scrutiny annoy Monsieur Houma. On the contrary he was smiling placidly and seemed to be quite at his ease.

"Of course by reputation you are well known to me, for during the past twenty years you have occupied the public mind so much that for a resident of New Orleans not to know something of Judge Clairborne would be impossible."

The judge merely bowed at the compliment.

"I assume that you read the newspapers and therefore are acquainted with the particulars of the mysterious death of Mrs. Esperance, setting aside the fact that you had a personal interest in that unfortunate lady."

"Excuse me, but is not that assumption on your part unwarranted by the facts in the case? Why do you think I had any personal interest in Mrs. Esperance?—a woman whom I never even saw."

"Why, I understood you were a visitor at her house," replied the young man, evidently perplexed by this assertion.

"No, sir; you have been wrongly informed!" exclaimed Clairborne, his tone slightly harsh, as though he was annoyed at the supposition.

"But I cannot understand how such a mistake could have been made, for I was assured by a gentleman who ought to have known that a Mr. Clairborne, whom I assumed to be you, of course, was a constant visitor at Mrs. Esperance's mansion."

"There is where your mistake lies. My son Raymond was, I believe, acquainted with the lady."

"Ah yes, I see!" Houma exclaimed, his countenance brightening up. "I was not aware that you had a son."

"I presume it is with him your business lies,"

and the judge's manner plainly indicated his desire to bring the interview to an end.

"Oh no, it is with you, sah, all the same."

"Come at once to the point then, sir; my time is valuable!"

"I represent the husband of Adeline Esperance."

And this communication was made in a mysterious manner as though the speaker expected it would produce an impression, but the judge merely nodded.

"The husband of Adeline Esperance, you understand," the other repeated.

"I understand, sir; go on, although I really think you are wasting both your own time and mine, for I cannot conceive of any interest I can have in this matter."

"Mrs. Esperance was a woman of property?" and the speaker looked at the judge in a suggestive way.

"I don't know anything whatever about it, sir."

"A lady of large wealth, or she was generally supposed to be from the style in which she lived, the costly jewels she wore and the general extravagance of her dress."

"I don't know anything about it, sir, nor do I care!" the judge exclaimed, in evident annoyance.

"Her husband, whom I have the honor to represent, as I had the pleasure of informing you—"

The judge lost patience at this repetition.

"Come, come, sir, to business! to your point at once! What has all this to do with me? Explain immediately or I shall summon the servant to show you out."

"Yes, sah, yes, sah; you must excuse my way; I know I am slow, but I will strive not to weary you. Mrs. Esperance's husband, in brief, although a man of property himself and therefore not pushed by immediate needs, desires to know exactly how his wife—from whom he had been separated for some years, but not legally, you understand—was situated at the time of her sudden taking off, and so I came to you for information—"

"What on earth do you suppose I know about it, sir?" snapped out Clairborne, much irritated.

"Well, you have got a mortgage on all her property!"

The judge settled back in his chair and a cold, hard look came over his face.

"I have got a mortgage on her property?" he repeated, slowly; "and pray, sir, from whom did you procure that valuable information?"

"Oh, there isn't any doubt about the truth of it."

"You are very confident; perhaps when years bring increase of wisdom you will not be so."

"But it is the truth," the other persisted.

"If you will take the trouble to go and examine the records you will change your opinion in regard to that, possibly."

"Oh yes; I understand the mortgages are not in your name, and that your advancing the money was to be kept a profound secret from Mrs. Esperance, everything being done in the name of Loperleese and Son, brokers; but you are the principal all the same. It was your money, and the sum was far in excess of the value of the property, and the transaction was so arranged that it was not a regular mortgage but more like a 'call' loan, payable on demand, and you could at any time, if you so willed, have stripped the lady of everything she had in the world—house, furniture, jewels, dresses, everything, at a day's notice."

The judge was terribly annoyed; his secret was known, and he saw that it would be folly to attempt to deny the truth longer; some clerk in the office of the brokers, who had in the course of business got a knowledge of the matter, had betrayed it.

"Sir, your statement is correct," he said, in a cold, hard, mechanical way—the way of the judge pronouncing sentence; "and since you know so much, learn from me more: I did lend this money—I did arrange the loan so that at a few hours' notice I could drive this woman forth into the world a beggar. Why did I trouble myself with this impostor? Because she had entrapped my only son—she had my boy in her toils, and if I could not release him in any other way, rather than that he should disgrace the honored name he bears, and drag it into the mire by a union with this woman, I had resolved to buy the woman off—to say to her, 'Marry my son, I will not only disinherit him, but call on you for the payment of this money,—which I knew full well she had squandered—'and so take from you everything that you have, even to the dress upon your back; but if you will depart, you are free to go and carry all with you.' Now, sir, you know all, and why I soiled my hands with this wretched creature. If I had known she had a husband, of course I should not have troubled myself. As the matter stands the law must take its course. If your client can pay the bill, well and good."

"I will see, sah," and then the visitor withdrew, apparently crestfallen.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

It was the day set for the funeral of the murdered woman. Two in the afternoon was the hour fixed for the services, but as early as ten in the morning groups of curious folks began to assemble in the vicinity of the house, staring at the white walls of the mansion half-hid by their drapery of clinging vines as though the unconscious wood had had some part in the dreadful deed which had taken place within and could "a tale unfold" if the humor seized upon it to speak.

The house wherein some direful deed has taken place always possesses a great attraction for the morbidly-inclined mind, and so the gaping wonder-seekers came in crowds.

They were in the mansion, peering curiously from room to room. The place had been taken possession of by the police, and these gentlemen of the "locust" had their patience sorely tried in answering the thousand and one questions put to them by the curious people who came to stare at the scene of the tragedy and to speculate as to who had done the terrible deed.

The newspapers of the city had not failed to give most elaborate accounts of the affair, so strange in many particulars and so different from the tragedies common to the section.

The strange way in which the death wound had been given—the remarkable, toy-like weapon used by the slayer, and the unaccountable disappearance of the valuable diamonds (which, it will be recalled, had been upon the person of the victim when she had been discovered by the gentlemen who had hastened to her assistance when alarmed by her scream, and which had been removed by some one in the brief interval, when the body had been left unwatched, that occurred between the departure of the guests and the arrival of the servants) all these had been detailed at length and freely commented upon, and the most extraordinary speculations indulged in, regarding the perpetrator of the crime.

The disappearance of the jewels made almost everybody of one mind in regard to the motive of the bloody deed—robbery.

Some desperate wretch had concealed himself within the apartment, assaulted and slain the lady; then, alarmed by the approach of the guests had concealed himself somewhere within the room, until an opportunity offered for him to secure the diamonds and decamp.

But the boldness of the deed rendered it certain that the robber was a desperado of the first water, and, acting upon this idea, the police had hunted in the city high and low for well-known and desperate criminals, men whose previous deeds rendered probable the supposition that they might have had a hand in this crime.

New Orleans is a big city, with a large floating population, and probably with as many, if not more, evil-doers as any other city in the country in proportion to its population.

A half-a-dozen villains the argus-eyed police detectives picked out as having "sand" enough to commit such a deed, and immediately proceeded to "shadow" these fellows—much to their amusement, for no sooner was this watch set than the suspected men were aware of the fact; for, as a rule, the professional criminals know the detectives much better than the detectives know them.

The house, particularly the room where the murder had been committed, was the chief point of attraction to the crowd, but quite a number strolled around the gardens, gaping up at the verandas and speculating how the murderer managed to gain entrance to the room above without attracting any attention; and then—greater wonder—how he had contrived to escape with the diamonds after the deed was done, the house alarmed, and all on the lookout for the bloody slayer.

Prominent among the curiosity-seekers was a gentleman who excited quite a deal of attention on account of his peculiar appearance.

He was a stranger to all, apparently knew no one of the numerous visitors, avoided all attempts to draw him into conversation, but whenever he noticed a group busily engaged in discussing the tragedy, and speculating in regard to the perpetrator, and how the deed had been done, would invariably approach so as to overhear all that was said.

In person this man was tall, thin and raw-boned; olive complexion; sharp, black eyes, deeply sunken in the head, and shaded with heavy, bushy eyebrows; a hawk nose; large mouth, with thin lips, shaded by a curling, jet-black mustache, prodigious in its length, with the ends carefully waxed; the hair as black as the mustache, and curled in little ringlets tight to his head. He was not a young-looking person, and yet could not be called old, but a careful observer would have decided that he was much older than he appeared.

He was well-dressed—too well-dressed, and the amount of jewelry he displayed was astonishing.

But for all his overdressing, and the rather commanding, theatrical way in which he carried himself, most people, at first sight, would have pronounced him a pleasant, affable ap-

pearing gentleman, rather eccentric in his dress and ways, perhaps, but a careful student of human nature would have looked upon him as a man to be avoided, for there was something about him that suggested pictured representations of the Evil One, in human garb, prowling about the earth seeking whom he might destroy, there was something Satanic about the man in his crafty, hollow smile, and the peculiar way which he had of showing his white, fang-like teeth.

After loitering near one of the groups for a while, and hearing the oracle of the party declare his belief that the murderer had used the river and a boat both for gaining the plantation and for escaping from it, he sauntered toward the stream, as though desirous of seeing if he could find anything there to confirm or dispute the notion.

As he came to the edge of the garden, an abrupt turn of the path brought him face to face with a man sprawled upon a garden-bench, enjoying the heat of the sun.

A very unsavory fellow, indeed—old, short, bloated, gray hair, which showed the prison crop, unshaven chin, watery, sunken eyes, a wretched suit of clothes, so stained and worn that the original color could only be guessed at, not told; a finer specimen of the genuine tramp could not be found.

The two men came face to face and instantly each recognized the other.

The old tramp sat upright and grinned until it seemed as if his huge mouth extended from ear to ear, while, despite the wonderful command which the other had over himself, a result due to long years of practice, he started and muttered something in French which sounded very much like a malediction.

At any rate that was what the fat fellow imagined, for he instantly exclaimed:

"Don't swear, cully, or you won't catch any fish."

It was the first impulse of the other to turn upon his heel and ignore the presence of the tramp, but when at a flash he saw that in so doing a point might be lost, he gave a sort of a theatrical start, and cried:

"Upon my life! Can I believe my eyes? Why, I thought you were hung long ago!"

"Jes' so, jes' so; same to you, old man. I reckoned when they got hold of you, in France, it would be a lifter for you, sure, but I see Toulon and the galley couldn't keep you. Oh, you're a rum cove, you are; 'tain't no easy matter to put salt on your tail."

"You do me proud," and the tall man placed his hand upon his heart and bowed. "And in return I might say that I didn't expect to have the pleasure of seeing you in this land of the free and the home of the brave. I thought after that little affair of the forged paper in London, you would emigrate, at government expense, and probably would feel inclined to remain abroad for quite a term of years."

"Oh, well, my bad companions got me into that hole, and, when I found out what the leetle game was, I jes' up and showed 'em that Jack was as good as his master."

"How so?"

"I turned queen's evidence, and through my testimony the hull gang was convicted."

"Why, you infernal scoundrel!" cried the other, fairly turning white in indignation.

"Oh, you needn't come the virtuous dodge! Who was it that split on his pals in France and put 'em all into the hands of Jack Ketch, while he got off with a few years at the galley? and you planned the hull job, too, you know you did, from A to izzard."

"It's a lie!"

"No, it tain't; and I reckon there's a chap or two in France wot would go a hundred miles on their hands and knees, a'most, for to git a chance to make a nice little hole in your stomach with a poniard, and all because you peached on yer pals."

"Well, it isn't any use for us to bandy words—"

"Pot callin' the kettle black, eh?"

"That is about it; but what are you doing here, and in such a wretched condition? Going to hire yourself out as a scare-crow?"

"I am rather down at the heel—run to seed like—but mebbe I'll pick up soon. I ain't in fine feather, like you."

"No, I should say not; down on your luck, eh? How do you call yourself now?"

"Same as allers, Johnny Roach; and you—are you French Louis now, or Larry, the Bloke?"

"Neither; Adolph De Bellville is my name."

"Putting on style, hey? and I s'pose, my lord dook, you did the trick up yonder," and he pointed to the mansion.

"Oh, no; that unfortunate lady, Mrs. Esperance, was my wife."

CHAPTER VIII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

A low whistle escaped from the lips of the tramp at this surprising declaration, and he surveyed the Frenchman with an expression of the most intense astonishment as that worthy took out his scented handkerchief and applied it with a melancholy air to his eyes.

"Your wife!"

"Exactly; my wife, and that is the reason why I am here."

"Your wife!" and the bummer repeated the exclamation, as though unable to credit it.

"Yes; why do you echo my words like a parrot? I am a gentleman born, and come of a very good family, although through a chain of circumstances, which I could not avoid, I got into trouble and was compelled to associate with men who really were not worthy to blacken my shoes. This poor lady, who died so terrible a death, became my wife a long, long time ago, for in confidence, my dear Johnny, let me tell you that, although they speak of her as being a woman of twenty-five or thirty, she was no more a chicken than I am."

"Oh, yes, I know that."

The Frenchman appeared amazed at this.

"You know something about her, then?"

"Well, I think I do; w'ot would I be doing here if I didn't?"

"I can't really see what connection there could have been between you and my wife."

"Mebbe you ain't so well posted 'bout her as you think you are," replied the tramp, with a malicious grin.

"That is very true in one respect; for the last eight or ten years I have not known much about her."

"And before that time? Go fifteen or twenty years back."

"What the deuce are you driving at? Do you want to make the woman out old enough to be a grandmother?"

"I reckon, for all that you claim she was your wife, you don't know as much about her age as you might, and as I know."

"And what do you know about it?"

"A heap sight more than you do, an' you kin bet a jugful on it, too!" returned the old wretch.

"I met the lady about ten years ago in Paris."

"Yes, I reckon she has been there; I reckon she has been 'bout all over the world; she was a tearer—go anywheres for a chance to make a stake."

"She was laboring under some slight pecuniary difficulties just then."

"I never heered tell on her when she wasn't."

"Just at that time by a series of lucky coups—"

"Gaming or forging or housebreaking?"

"The first, my amiable friend, if you must know. I had broken the bank at Hamburg and was floating on the very topmost wave—champagne flowing like water, diamonds, my own carriage, and all that sort of thing."

"What were you then, a French count, a Russian prince, or—"

"No, no, you wouldn't guess in a week; those disguises are old, obsolete in this age of progress; they may do for your common adventurer, but for a first-class artist like myself, a man of positive genius, to use the expressive phrase of this great country, it is 'played out.' I was at that time a diamond merchant from Brazil, of French extraction but Portuguese by birth, the younger son of a noble house who, disdaining the usual genteel but beggarly vocations open to the cadets of a family of princely pretensions but of limited means, had emigrated to the New World, and amid the diamond fields had worked out a colossal fortune."

"Beau'ful! a reg'lar fairy tale."

"Oh, yes; a first class ghost story, and every one swallowed it without a murmur, particularly after I broke the bank one night with a marvelous run on the red. Ten times in succession red came up and I doubled my stake every time, and in the ten rounds the bank caved in and I was the hero of the hour. If any envious soul doubted my story and my diamonds before, none were bold enough to do so openly after that night's triumph. Adeline, that was Mrs. Esperance's first name, you know—"

"Yes, I know it; mighty few things 'bout her that I don't know. It was her real name, too, no put on 'bout that."

"Well, as she was at that time in a rather tight place, being pressed by some rascally tra'lesmen, and the continental laws are the very deuce, you know—"

"Yes, pony up, or go to jail. I've bin there."

She looked upon me as a lawful prey. With all her shrewdness she had not the slightest suspicion that I was anything but what I assumed to be. I, with more tact or penetration, suspected that, instead of being a rich American widow, which she represented herself to be, she was an adventuress, depending upon her wits for a living. But, it suited my game just then to have such a woman. I fancied that such a couple working together would be invincible, and so I allowed myself to be captivated and we were married."

"All right and reg'lar?—no gum-game 'bout it?" asked the old tramp, ever suspicious.

"Oh, yes; no doubt about that; everything was as straight as a string. I wished it so, for I wanted to bind the woman to me, but there I made a slight miscalculation."

Johnny Roach laughed outright.

"Ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho!" he roared; "she wasn't the kind of gal to be bound to anybody, if it didn't suit her book."

"Your knowledge of her character argues a close acquaintanceship. You are quite right; I could no more hold her after she discovered who and what I was than a man could hold a wild horse with a silken thread. My beautiful and ingenious idea that together—working in concert, we could make a magnificent living out of the gullible world, she rejected in utter scorn. You know the kind of man I am—not one given to much nonsense, and when I make up my mind to a thing it takes considerable to turn me from my way. I remonstrated with her gently, pointed out that she was my wife—that she had promised to love, honor and obey—obey in particular, and if she persisted in acting contrary to my wishes I should be obliged to adopt measures which might prove to be particularly unpleasant to her."

"To cut your long rigmarole short, you swore that you would beat her if she didn't knuckle; she refused, for she had a fiend's temper; you tried it on and she either plugged you with a pistol-bullet or else made a hole into you with a knife."

"Corbleu!" cried the other, surveying the tramp with unbounded astonishment, "were you on the spot, then, to know all that happened? or are you a medium, gifted with second sight?"

"Neither, but I know the gal and knew her long before you did."

"Well, sir, your account is singularly exact; the moment I struck her—just a little gentle slap with the palm of my hand on the face, as a warning that I was not to be trifled with—a knife flung before my eyes and, almost before I comprehended what she was up to, I lay on my back on the floor, with an ugly gash in my side, bleeding and helpless. Then she appropriated all the valuables she could lay her hands upon and levanted."

"Oh, I could have told you at the furst that she wasn't the kind of bird to stand having her wings clipped."

"I didn't take the trouble to follow her; I had had quite enough; a tiger-cat in the household is not to my liking. I let her go and I never expected to see her again; that was eight or ten years ago, and I have never seen or heard of her until about six or seven weeks ago, when, happening to come to New Orleans, who should I see in a superb turn-out but my beauty! I was not in the best of circumstances and from her appearance it was evident she was, and so I have been debating in regard to the best method of making her share a portion of her apparent wealth with me, for I had an idea that, rather than have me come out and proclaim the tender tie which existed between us, she would come down with quite a goodly sum of hush-money, and this very night I was going to commence operations. This infernal murder of course has upset my plan; but I shall come in all the same for what I want, for, just as soon as the funeral is over, I shall proclaim that I am the husband of Adeline Esperance and demand my rights."

"Mebbe you will not find it so easy to prove that," Roach suggested.

"Oh, yes, I will; and that is what I have been waiting for. I sent to Europe for the necessary legal documents and they arrived yesterday. I had a suspicion that my darling would dispute my claim, so I resolved not to move until I had everything in condition."

"Well, seeing how things are, it seems to me there wasn't much reason for you to jab the knife into her. You had more to make by her living than dead."

"No doubt about that; but I say, now, what brings you here?"

"The same errand that you come on, exactly."

"I don't comprehend how that can be."

"This dead gal was your wife?"

"Yes."

"So she was mine! You are only a kind of a brevet husband; I am the original Jacobs."

"Oh, come, come; that's too thin!"

"You kin bet your boots it's the truth!" the tramp protested. "You married her eight or ten years ago in Europe; I married her twenty odd years ago in this country and right in this city of Orleans, too. I wasn't sich a beaten, battered-up old hulk as I am now, but she was the ruin of my life and made me the low, mean, miserable wretch that I now am. I ain't got many years of life left, and I ain't fit to rough it now, as I used to. I can't sleep under the lee of a rail-fence or on the soft side of a station-house plank with the same comfort as of old, and I crept back to this Southern city to get away from the Northern winter for I knew that another tussle with the snow and the icy cold would finish me; and here in Orleans, in the city where twenty odd years ago I held my head up with the best of them, I saw the woman who had been the ruin of my life, and she was all dressed in silks and laces, with diamonds glittering on her person, looking jest about as young as she did on our bridal morn, years and years ago, while I hobbled through the streets, a broken-down, miserable beggar,

trotting as fast as my legs can carry me to my grave in Potter's Field. She had everything, I had nothing, and I made up my mind to ask

her to give a trifte to the poor wretch whom she had ruined."

"I see; I guess the sequel, old fellow; you haven't been cautious, and have let the cat out of the bag; but you can depend upon my discretion, for I wouldn't go back on an old pal. You came to see her; she, like the tiger-cat that she was, laughed at your demand, and defied you; then, exasperated and desperate, you struck her, determined to have the diamonds at any rate. It was you, my bold Johnny Roach—Johnny, the lodger, as you used to be called in the slums of London—who killed Adeline Esperance."

"You would make a fine detective bloke!" the tramp cried, in contempt; "you could beat them donkeys in making foolish guesses."

"Come, old fellow, make a clean breast of it," persisted the other, coaxingly. "You haven't anything to fear from me. Why, what could I make by peaching on you? Ain't it clearly for my interest to stand in with you? You have the diamonds, and, from what I have seen of them, I should think they ought to be worth twelve or fifteen thousand dollars. Now, I'm just the man to plant those jewels for you, for I know as much about diamonds as any Jew broker in the world, and I know the very man, too, right here in New Orleans, who will buy them and give a fair price—a quiet, safe man, who never goes back on a customer. Let me have the handling of the matter, and I can get you more for the stones, after my share is taken out, than you can possibly realize yourself."

"Oh, you are 'way off!" the old bummer exclaimed, impatiently. "Did you ever hear tell on me doing any sich thing? A little bit of sneak-thieving, when there ain't much chance to be cotched, I might try my hand at, but for a murder—oh, no; that's out of my line entirely."

The Frenchman favored the tramp with a penetrating gaze; it was plain he doubted.

"Well, Johnny, if you don't want to trust me, all right; but how about this husband business—are you coming in to dispute my claim?"

"Not much, if I know myself!" the other replied, promptly. "You have got the papers 'bout your affairs all right, but I reckon it would puzzle me to prove that I ever married her; so go ahead with your dog-cart, and if you make a big stake, jest remember your humble servant to command."

"Oh, certainly; and just you think over what I have said, and perhaps you can see a way to come to some agreement; ta, ta," and the tall fellow sauntered away.

The old tramp looked after him with a strange expression upon his face.

"Ay, that is the way the world goes," he muttered. "That fellow is like a cork; there isn't any keeping him under water; press him down under the waves of adversity all you like, he is sure to bob up again, while I, once down, never rise, but stick fast on the bottom, a wretched old ruined hulk; but I can't let liquor alone, and he can, and that is where he has the advantage over me. It is strange that the one woman should connect two such men as this bold, cunning rascal and myself. Upon how many other men did she fasten her fangs? how many did she fly from? how many did she ruin as she ruined me? No wonder some desperate hand struck her down."

"But who did it—that's the rub; who did it, cully, eh?" quoth a shrill voice, and the bummer, looking around him in astonishment, saw the head of a tawny-skinned youth protruding from a clump of bushes a few paces distant.

"Don't be afraid, cull; I'm on the 'cross,' I am, and I'm Limber Joe from Genoa."

CHAPTER IX.

THE ARREST.

"W'ot do you want, anyway?" demanded the old tramp, suspiciously, as the boy crawled out from his covert and stood upright, a good specimen of the wandering Italian lad.

He was a good-sized lad, rather small-limbed, as are the majority of his race, and poorly clad; his hair, black as jet, hung in tangled masses from under his slouchy cap; there were faint indications of a beard on his chin and upper lip which seemed to indicate that he was not so young as he looked. In his hand he carried a violin and bow, and over his shoulders a greasy wallet was suspended.

"Don't be 'fraid; I'm as rum a cull as you will find from here to England," replied the boy, who spoke very plain English with only a slight foreign accent. "I travel with my violin and I play for the gentlefolks, and when I have a chance I pick up any loose valuables that may happen to be laying around; oh, I'm fly to the time o' day. I was snoozing down in the bushes when you and this other bloke woke me with your patter. I don't know you—that is, I never met you afore, although I have heard of you in 'cross kens' over the ocean, but, as for that beauty of De Bellville, I know him as well as a monk does his mass. I have 'done time' right alongside of him at the galleys—Toulon, you know. 'French Louis,' you call him; 'Louis, the Snake,' was his name at Tou-

ion, and there wasn't one of his pals who would trust him as far as they could see him. Don't you see what he is up to? When he announces that he is the husband of this dead woman, this Mrs. Esperance, isn't it likely there will be some suspicion that he knows something about her death? Won't the people ask how it was that he has been in this part of the country so long and yet never said who he was or called upon his wife? Is there any other man who will profit more by her death than he? Of course not, and he wanted you to confide in him, so that he could, by some trick, throw the burden of the murder on your shoulders! In my country we have a saying of give a dog a bad name and then hang him; you have the bad name already, eh, master? There is a reward of five hundred dollars offered for the murderer; wouldn't that be a nice little sum for Monsieur De Bellville to clutch? and how easily he could do it, too, if he could succeed in throwing suspicion upon you!"

The old man was amazed; this was the sharpest and shrewdest youth he had encountered in all his wandering.

"He is a snake, and he will bite you on the heel in an instant if he only has the chance," the boy continued. "I, Genoa Joe, was not born without ears or eyes. With my fiddle and my petty thieving I make a very poor living. Five hundred dollars! it is a fortune! I can set up a fruit stand on a corner and soon make money enough out of these fool Americans to go back to Italy and live like a prince all the rest of my days! Since I heard of the five hundred dollars reward offered for the capture of the murderer I cannot sleep for thinking of it; I lay awake at night and the big silver dollars dance before my eyes—they are so real; I put out my hand to clutch them. So I come here to-day; I want the money; I hide in the bushes that I may see without being seen. The Snake comes; oh, I know him well, and he is my game! Eh, what do you say?"

The tramp shook his head.

"You do not believe he struck the blow?" demanded the boy.

"No, it is a grade above *his* work. If it was forgery, now, or a skillful little bit of safe-cracking."

"Ah, yes; he is a master-hand at either. I remember his reputation well at Toulon, but do you believe what he says about bein' married to the dead woman? Is not that a lie? He is all lies, you know, from head to heel!"

"It is not impossible; he seemed to know all about her."

"A lie—a lie, all lies about him!" the boy exclaimed, with great rapidity. "His papers are forged; he murdered the woman, and now, by means of his forged papers, he intends to seize upon all that she has left; but we will stop it, eh, you and I, for we know him, and we will be on the watch, and when he least expects it we will have him by the heels, and then good-by to the Snake, and we will clutch the five hundred dollars reward!"

"Oh, I ain't got time to waste; I have got to look out for my living."

"I will 'stake' you, American fashion!" cried the boy.

But before the old tramp could reply three police officers came quietly around the turn in the path and with leveled weapons menaced the two.

"Surrender the pair of yeas or we be afther letting daylight through yeas, do ye mind?" commanded the sergeant who led the little squad.

The boy cast a furious glance around and instantly thrust his hand into his bosom as if to grasp a weapon, but the quick eyes of the police sergeant saw the motion, and immediately exclaimed:

"Take yer hand out of that, ye young divil-skinned, or be the piper that played before Moses I'll put yeas as full of holes as the top of a pepper-box!"

Thus warned the boy withdrew his hand and glared sullenly upon his captors.

The old tramp, on the contrary, had taken the matter in the most philosophical way, and had manifested neither alarm or anger.

"Well, boys, w'ot is it? W'ot are you driving at, anyway, cavorting 'round here like a lot of bob-tailed mules in fly time?"

"You are arrested, sur!"

"In course! I kin see that with half an eye; but, what for, that is the question before the meeting?"

"For the murder of Mrs. Esperance."

An incredulous look came over the bloated face of the tramp.

"Oh, get out! You are joking!"

"Faith, then, it's meself that's thinking you'll find that it is a sorry joke afore you git thr'u' wid it."

"Where's your warrant—lemme see yer warrant!" demanded old Johnny. "You ain't got any right to deprive a lawful citizen of these United States of his liberty without due process of law. You can't fool me on these here p'ints; I reckon I know what the law is as well as any two-legged man you kin skeer up."

"If you open yer mouth so wide ye'll be

affher takin' cold," responded the officer, sarcastically. "Devil a bit of a warrent will we be afther showing yeas, but ye'll come wid us, me bold lark, or we'll know the rason why. Take out yer clubs, byes, and if they resist tap 'em gently on the top of the head. Faix! if ye don't come quietly we'll fix ye so that your own mother won't know ye!"

"Blast my hide if I won't make you sweat for this here!" the old tramp exclaimed.

"Certainly, of course, to be shure you will! It's broke I'll be for this arrest, I'm thinking;" and then the sergeant winked at his companions, who showed their appreciation of their leader's humor by grinning.

"What for you take *me*, eh?" demanded the boy, glaring at the officials. "What have I done, you fool American?"

"Aisy now, you beast of an I-talian!" cried the officer, raising his club, threateningly, "or I'll crack that poodle-dog head of yours! Don't ye be afther insulting the majesty of the law! You are wanted for murder, both on yeas, do ye mind, and it's my duty to warn you to be careful phat you say, for it will be used as evidence ag'in ye. Both of ye have been prowling around here for some time, and we have had our eyes upon ye, and if both of yer necks don't git stretched for this nate little job then my name is not Phelim O'Dowd."

To attempt to resist would have been useless against such odds, and so, unwillingly enough, the two allowed themselves to be handcuffed; and with a great show of ceremony they were conducted to the mansion where the chief of the city police put them through a brief examination.

The pair had been arrested solely on suspicion, the attention of the chief having been directed to the old tramp by the acute Frenchman, who, after having meditated over his interview with "Johnny Roach," had come to the conclusion that it would be to his interest to have that individual locked up for a while. So he had gone to the chief and informed him that there was a suspicious-looking tramp skulking about the gardens, just such a man as would be apt to have a hand in any villainy.

The chief, an ignorant, conceited fellow who did not possess the first qualification for his position, jumped at the chance of arresting somebody, on account of the murder, for as yet he had not succeeded in obtaining the slightest clew to the doer of the deed. So the officers were dispatched, in search of the tramp, and when the Irish sergeant in command saw the Italian boy in company with the tramp the brilliant idea occurred to him that it would be a good plan to take them both "in."

The examination was a farce, of course. There was not the slightest evidence to warrant the chief in holding either one of the prisoners, but, as one was a battered-up old bummer, and the other a suspicious-looking foreigner, the blundering official got it into his head that, even if they had not committed the deed they probably knew something about it, and that by holding them in prisn he might be able to worry a confession out of them; so, despite their angry protestations, the two were dispatched in charge of the officers to the city jail.

"Aha! you see we are going to be pals, after all!" the boy exclaimed, as they entered the prison together.

"Confound your tawny hide!" Johnny Roach muttered, in a rage. "You have brought me bad luck."

CHAPTER X.

TRAILING THE CRIME.

As usual, the police blundered; the arrest of Johnny Roach and the Italian boy, Genoa Joe, was a stupid piece of work, for there was not the slightest evidence against either connecting them with the crime, and after examination the magistrate was compelled to discharge them, although, anxious to oblige the chief of police, who was a personal and political friend, he did his best to find some excuse to hold them in custody; but there was no excuse, and so, despite his firm belief that the tramp and the fiddler had had a hand in the crime, the chief had the mortification of seeing the two march triumphantly out of the court-room.

"I knewed you couldn't hold me! I told the cop he had no business to nail me without a warrant! Teach your grandmother to suck eggs! W'ot I don't know 'bout law ain't worth knowin'! Ta, ta!" ejaculated Johnny Roach, for a parting shot, as he swaggered forth, a free man once more.

The funeral was over, the last sad rites were done, and the remains of the murdered woman had been committed to a receiving-tomb in that peculiar old grave-yard, New Orleans's "city of the dead," where the tombs are above ground instead of below.

Night had come, and the police chief sat in his private office puzzling his brains over the mysterious murder.

Before him on the table was the weapon with which the deed had been done. As had been decided at the inquest, it was a regular physician's

lancet, with a tortoise-shell handle—a new one apparently, for it showed no signs of ever having been used.

And the chief sat and stared at the lancet, turning it over in his fingers every now and then as if he expected that by so doing some new developments would result.

In spite of all their search this lancet was the only thing the police could find that had any connection with the deed.

The chief was uneasy in his mind. The newspapers, having nothing better to do, had devoted a great deal of space to the murder and had abused the police force of the city roundly for their inability to discover any clew to the assassin, and the police chief, like most men in public life, was terribly sensitive to these "pencil-stabs."

And while the chief was cursing the ill-luck which had attended his efforts, and wishing that the newspaper men were at the bottom of the river, an officer conducted two gentlemen into the room with the information that they called upon important business.

The two, were the Englishman, Sir John Packingham, and a rather slender-built, foreign-looking gentleman with a short, black beard, piercing eyes and hair of the same hue, whom the other introduced as Monsieur Paul Rivoiseur.

The appearance of the portly, well-dressed Englishman at once inspired the officer with respect, which was increased when the stranger made known his name. There are many sons of this free land who "dearly love a lord," and the police captain happened to be one of them; and, greater yet became the feeling when it was explained to him that the quiet looking Monsieur Rivoiseur was one of the most celebrated of French detectives.

The chief insisted upon his visitors taking chairs, and then Sir John, after requiting the hospitality with some cigars of a quality that the officer rarely got between his teeth, and the party were enveloped in a cloud of fragrant smoke, proceeded to explain what had brought him there.

He had been acquainted with the victim of the late fearful tragedy, Mrs. Esperance, in Europe, and as he had no particular occupation to take up his time just then, he had resolved to devote himself to solving the mystery of the murder, particularly as he had happened just then to run across Monsieur Rivoiseur who, on a leave of absence, was making a tour of America.

Here was a reinforcement with a vengeance, and the spirits of the depressed official at once rose. He expressed himself delighted at the offer and frankly admitted that the affair had completely baffled both himself and his assistants.

"You see, monsieur," he explained to the Frenchman, turning his attention more particularly to that gentleman, as being better posted in detective matters than his companion, "we have really nothing at all to work upon, excepting this plaything with which the deed was done," and the chief passed the lancet over that his visitors might examine it.

"I have read ze case ovair very carefully," the Frenchman remarked, speaking with a strong accent, "and I have made up my mind zat ze probabilities are zat ze blow was struck by some one who knew exactly where to strike—ze spot where one leetle stab would produce death without giving ze woman time to cry out very mooch."

"That is the general opinion."

"No doubt, no doubt," Sir John assented. "If it had been a common ruffian or tramp, he would have used a knife. Then another thing puzzles myself and monsieur here—you see, we have discussed the matter in all its bearings—how was it possible for the assassin to approach near enough to his victim to strike the tiny blade of the lancet into her throat without her giving an alarm? According to all accounts the blow could not have been inflicted from behind."

"So the doctors decided, and they scouted the idea of its being a suicide."

"Yes, we read the reports, and the medical men all agreed that the person who inflicted the blow must have been standing right in front of the woman, and that only a steady and practiced hand would be likely at a single blow to produce such a fatal result," said the Englishman.

"Zat ze lady did not cry out when she see her murderer was very mooch strange," the Frenchman remarked.

"Yes, that p'int is a mighty tough one to get round," the chief admitted. "When the old tramp and the Italian boy were arrested on suspicion upon being found prowling around the grounds of the house where the murder had occurred, I thought I had got hold of the right parties, but we couldn't prove anything against them, and when you come to think it over, if Mrs. Esperance had found either one of the two in her private apartment upon going upstairs, she most certainly would have given an alarm, for, as far as I can find out, she was anything but a chicken-hearted woman."

"She was a lady of lion-like courage and

very free indeed from the timidity natural to her sex," Sir John declared.

"From zis circumstance, zen, ze deduction is plain zat ze person who struck ze blow upon being found ze apartment in, by madame, did not cause her mooth alarm—he was no stranger; if he had 'a' been she would make a cry-out."

This subtile method of "putting two and two together" astounded the chief, for his dull brain had never thought of such a thing.

Now it was as plain as a pike-staff that whoever did the deed was not a stranger to the victim, and his presence within the room was not unexpected nor resented by her!

The captain pulled his long beard for a moment in deep thought; an entirely new train of ideas had come to him in which neither tramps, wandering Italian boys nor other common vagabonds figured.

"May I be hanged if I don't think you are on the right track, monsieur!" he exclaimed at last. "It was some one whom she knew all about and of whom she was not afraid. Oh, no doubt about that at all; we have been barking up the wrong tree, looking for the man outside of the house instead of within. But, I say, what do you think about the diamond business? Whoever did the job went for the sparklers, and that is where I got thrown off the track. I took it for granted that the trick had been worked by some scalawag who had been hanging round anxious for a chance to nip the diamonds."

"Oh, monsieur, I do not say zat ze robbery was not ze main thing—zat was ze grand coup; ze murder but ze means by which ze end was reached. And, monsieur, if you will be pleased to remember some of ze greatest crimes have been committed by gentlemans and ladies, not by ze common people. Ze jewels were worth a fortune; a man of birth in what you call a tight place, vill sometimes grab at a fortune as quickly as ze beggar."

"More quickly, sometimes, by Jove!" cried Sir John, who had "been there" and "knew how it was himself." "A man well-brought up, and used to money, when suddenly stinted, will feel it a hundred times more than the poor devil who has never had any and has always lived from hand to mouth."

"What course would you recommend, monsieur?"

"In the first place," Sir John hastened to say, "our interest and intervention in the matter are to be kept a profound secret, not to be confided to any one under any consideration."

The chief pledged himself to this, and then the Frenchman unfolded his plan.

"Let me try my hand first if you will be so kind," he said. "You give a-me a list of ze names of all ze gentlemans and ladies who were at ze house on ze night of ze murder and I vill pay my respects to them, one by one."

"You want the ladies' names, too?"

"Why not? Have you no female fiends in zis country? We have plenty in France. I have seen a woman use a knife as well as any mans in my time."

"That's true."

"Zen put a watch on all pawnbrokers' shops or places where ze diamonds may be offered; zen I must see to ze shops where lancets are sold. I must find out who bought zat tool. Do you know of any doctor, a friend of ze madame?"

"No. By George, though, young Clairborne is studying for one, and he was very intimate there, I understand."

"Perhaps zat gentlemans is—vat you call him? my mutton, eh?" observed the detective, with a grin.

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE OF THE PAST.

JUDGE CLAIRBORNE was a man noted for quickness of action, and now that he had sounded his son, and ascertained his views in regard to a union with Miss Lauderdale, finding that he was in no ways averse to the match he determined to hurry matters.

He had anticipated that there would be trouble in gaining the young gentleman's consent to the union, for he was a close observer and was satisfied that the mysterious Mrs. Esperance had succeeded in bewitching Raymond, and he feared it would be a difficult matter to break the silken chains which sometimes, when woven by a beautiful woman's cunning hand, are as strong as links of steel.

He was both surprised and gratified when he found that Raymond had, of his own accord, broken off with the siren, and he resolved to bring matters to a climax before Mrs. Esperance could forge anew the chain which had bound the young man to her.

In regard to the girl the judge, with all his sagacity, was puzzled. She was a riddle not easily read. Whether she would accept his son for a husband, or refuse him, Clairborne knew not, and so, having brought Raymond to a decision, the judge proceeded to ascertain how the heiress was affected in regard to the master.

"I must know the truth and immediately,"

he murmured, one day as he dressed himself. "I am late this morning, and I shall probably meet her at breakfast; I could not have a better opportunity."

The judge was strangely out of sorts and his hands trembled visibly as he adjusted his necktie; Clairborne never troubled his valet upon these occasions.

"I am getting old," he murmured, as he contemplated himself in the glass, "and the weight of care is beginning to tell upon me," then he shook his head, sadly.

The judge usually breakfasted before the rest of the household as he was an early riser, although seldom retiring to bed before midnight, for Clairborne, as his colored valet, old Julius, had often remarked, with a doleful shake of the head, was burning his candle at both ends, but on this morning, which was the one following the night when Mrs. Esperance had met her death, he slept late, and, as he had anticipated, came down to the table at the same time as Miss Lauderdale.

After the meal was served and the servants discreetly retired, for such was the rule of the judge's household, so that conversation might be free and unrestrained, Clairborne came at once to the subject so much upon his mind.

The opportunity was a favorable one, for Raymond, who usually breakfasted with his cousin, had not yet risen.

The judge noticed that the girl did not look well, and he carefully led up to the point he wished to reach by commenting upon her personal appearance.

"What is the matter, Philippa?" he asked, "you are not looking well this morning."

"I have a slight headache," she replied. "I did not sleep well last night."

"Reading too late, I suppose; you must not allow fictions, however interesting, to interfere with your night's rest. Early to bed and early to rise, and you will have more color in your cheeks than is visible there now."

"I have not been very well for some time."

"You should take more exercise. Why is it that you and Raymond do not ride together more frequently? You are both very fond of the exercise."

"I cannot very well ask Raymond to go if he doesn't invite me."

"Possibly you are to blame for that; you girls have odd ways sometimes, and a young, spirited fellow like Raymond does not like to be refused. I am sure if you indicated by your manner that the invitation would be agreeable to you it would speedily be extended."

"Ah, my dear guardian, you are like all the gentlemen—you wish the lady to play the wooer."

"Oh, no, but you are naturally so cold, that any one not understanding you as I do, would be apt to imagine your peculiar behavior arose from aversion."

"I am sure Raymond knows me too well to believe that."

"Perhaps so, but he is also odd in his ways, and apt to jump quickly to conclusions; now, I presume, Philippa, it is no secret to you that I have set my heart upon a match between you two; in fact, your mother and I agreed to the arrangement years ago, when both you and Raymond were scarcely more than babes."

The girl looked down and toyed idly with her spoon, but not the least flush appeared on her face—not the slightest sign of the sweet confusion that comes from the revelation of love's young dream.

"Your mother and myself grew up together, and had it not been for stern parental interference we would have married, but in our case true love did not run smooth, and, although I would have defied the whole world for her sake, yet she, more easily guided, yielded to the entreaties of a mother whom she idolized, and gave her hand where she could not bestow her heart. She was a saint-like girl, though, and made both a good wife and a good mother. In a fit of pique I married also, and secured a woman who was a treasure, and whose kindly ministrations in time blotted out my boyish passion. But your mother and I, although fate had directed our footsteps into widely separated paths, always kept up our ancient friendship, and so arose the idea of a union between our two children."

Philippa had listened with interest to the judge's story, for the romance of her mother's early life was new to her, although she was well aware that from early girlhood her mother had always spoken of her as Raymond's little wife.

"And now, my dear Philippa, what have you to say to this idea? Is it very distasteful to you? I hope not, for I regard the solemnization of the marriage as a duty I owe to the memory of your dear mother, who was once all the world to me."

He watched the face of the girl narrowly as he put the question, but it was like one of marble, utterly devoid of all expression.

There was quite a long pause, and then she slowly raised her eyes, which had sought the table at the commencement of the speech, and said:

"Dear guardian, I have never refused you

obedience since I have dwelt beneath your roof; you have but to speak and I will obey."

"But that is not what I want," protested Clairborne, a little impatiently. "I do not want you to accept my son for your husband solely because it is my wish; I had hoped that a mutual affection would grow up between you. You are a lovely girl, as perfect, too, in your mind and disposition as in face and form, while Raymond, I am sure you will admit, is a noble fellow, fit match for any woman in the world."

"He is indeed, sir!"

"And can you not find it in your heart to love him a little—for I am sure the slightest encouragement from you would bring him to your feet in an instant; but you are so cold, so distant—"

"It is my nature, perhaps, and if it is so I cannot help it," the girl interposed, again dropping her eyes before the judge's earnest gaze.

"It is maidenly modesty and not want of interest in Raymond, then, that has caused her to treat him so coldly," mused the judge.

"My dear girl, I am pleased beyond expression to find I have misunderstood you. I can hardly explain to you how much I feared lest my son was distasteful to you, and that your consent to this union could not be won," he said aloud.

"Raymond has never sought it," she murmured.

"That neglect will be speedily atoned for, now that he understands, but your hitherto unaccountable coldness has kept him at a distance; yet you are right—a maiden worth the winning should not be too easily won. But in the future you may rest assured you will have no cause of complaint on that score."

Then the judge arose, and, bending over the girl, kissed the pure, white brow.

"You have taken quite a weight from my mind, my child, and I thank you for it."

Philippa put her handkerchief to her eyes and retreated precipitately from the room, while the judge returned to his breakfast, which he attacked with a far better appetite than he had enjoyed at the beginning of the meal.

"Thank Heaven, that is all arranged, and with much less trouble than I anticipated," he mused. "I begin to believe she does care for Raymond, after all. Having secured his consent, I fancied I would have trouble in obtaining hers; but now, if the worst comes to the worst, I am safe in that quarter."

These were mysterious words, and it is doubtful if there was any one besides the judge who could have explained their meaning.

By the time Clairborne had finished his coffee Raymond entered the room.

As the judge believed in striking when the iron was hot, he at once related to his son the conversation which had passed between the heiress and himself.

Raymond seemed decidedly out of humor, which he accounted for by saying that he had passed a miserable night, but he did not offer any opposition to the arrangement which his sire proposed.

"Very well, sir," he said. "I will comply with your wishes."

"And immediately; I have no sure hold on life, you know, and I am anxious to see you married before I receive my summons for the other world."

"I will wait on her this morning and press my suit, if it is your wish," Raymond assured him, a little surprised at the judge's eagerness.

"Do so by all means!" exclaimed Clairborne, his face lighting up.

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE BETROTHAL.

AGREEABLY to his promise, after he had finished his breakfast, which on this occasion was a mere apology for a meal, the young man sought for the heiress.

"She's done gone into de garden, sab," said the colored maid in response to Raymond's inquiry.

Into the garden then went the son, and in one of the summer-houses at the further extremity of the grounds he found Philippa.

She was seated in a rustic rocking-chair, curiously wrought out of red cedar, a book open in her lap, upon which her eyes were fixed, but she was not reading, for she held the book upside down, and there were traces of tears upon her long, dark eyelashes.

At the sound of Raymond's advancing footsteps she raised her head and gazed around her with a startled look like a frightened fawn, surprised in its forest lair.

But when she saw who it was, she forced a smile upon her lips and nodded in salutation.

"You are not a very early riser this morning," she said, endeavoring to assume a cheerfulness which she was far from feeling.

"I must plead guilty to the accusation, I fear. But, I was out late last night, and he who keeps late hours cannot be expected to emulate the lark in the morning," he replied, seating himself upon the rustic bench which ran around the sides of the summer-house.

"A frank confession is good for the soul, they

say, but, are you not a naughty boy to keep late hours?" she asked, shaking her finger, reprovingly.

"In the future I will do better, and, Philippa, I want you to aid me."

"I will do so gladly," and she looked him straight in the face as she spoke, her eyes clear, her face composed, not a sign of emotion visible, and yet she knew full well what was coming: a strange way for an affectionate maiden to receive a love avowal from the man she fancied.

And his manner, too, was strange; not in the least did he resemble an anxious lover.

"My father has told me of the conversation which he had with you this morning, at the breakfast-table, and now I come to you to plead my suit."

At last the lustrous eyes drooped, but not a sign of color appeared on the pale face.

"Philippa, I have been strangely situated," he continued; "for nearly a year now we have been constantly together, and that I have not learned to love you is because a dangerous woman—a siren, had wound her toils around me. Last night the spell was lifted, and for the first time I saw that I had allowed myself to become the plaything of a woman without a heart. Then the disgust I experienced taught me what I had thought was love was not love but fascination. The spell is broken now and I am free once more. I come to you with this confession, for it is not right to ask your hand in marriage without letting you know all."

"You are honest with me, and I thank you for it," the girl remarked, her eyes still bent upon the ground.

"I do not come to you, Philippa, in the guise of a despairing lover and beg you to wed me, and by so doing to save my life; but, on the contrary, as a plain, sensible, honest man, I beg you to consent to become my wife and I promise you to do all in my power to make you happy. I do not ask you to give me your love immediately, but only to allow me a chance to win it, which I feel sure in time I can do if I have the opportunity. Dear Philippa, will you be my wife?" and rising from his seat, he advanced to the girl, knelt by her side, and passing his arm around her slender waist looked up into the beautiful face, half averted from him.

Was it imagination or did a slight shiver quiver the girl's form as she felt the manly pressure of Raymond's arm.

The young man thought he felt the motion, and was puzzled to account for it.

The girl's face was pale as death, and she looked like anything but a maiden whose soul was filled with joy at the confirmation of love's young dream.

Slowly she yielded her hand to the warm grasp of her lover, yet she hesitated to reply.

"Speak, dear Philippa, and make me blessed forever!" he exclaimed. "Will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she answered, slowly, but with firm accent, and her beautiful dark eyes filled with tears.

Then Raymond arose, drew the girl to his breast and kissed the full, red lips, which submitted to the salute but returned it not.

"Oh, leave me now, Raymond," she pleaded, trembling with agitation. "I am not fit to receive your cares; give me time to accustom myself to this new relation. You have my promise, I will keep it, and will be to you a devoted, obedient wife, but, leave me, for I am not fit to talk."

"As you please; your words hereafter will be as law to me, my own dear one," Raymond responded, wondering at her agitation and unable to account for it, for her behavior did not seem to be natural under the circumstances; but though young in years he had had experience enough to know that the moods of a woman sometimes pass all comprehension, and so, in obedience to her wish, first pressing a kiss upon her cold forehead, he left her.

The moment he was gone the girl gave way to a storm of grief; bowing her head upon her hands she sobbed as if her heart would break. "What have I done—what have I done?" she moaned.

Then the storm passed away as quickly as it had arisen. She sprung to her feet and dashed the tear-drops from her eyes with an impatient motion.

"Oh, what a baby fool am I to weep when I should be burning with anger!" she cried, and with impulsive steps she hastened to the house, where, in a state of great excitement she bade her maid dress her for riding.

Half an hour later, on the back of her favorite horse, she was riding up Canal street. Straight out into the suburbs she went, but, instead of following the usual drive over the shell road to the lake, she turned abruptly to the left and galloped into the interior, along a little road, through a country rich with orange-trees and fragrant with orange-blossoms.

By this time her agitation had, in a measure, subsided, and when she saw a well-known figure in the road a short distance on, mounted on a bay horse, which, though old in years, carried its master with all the ease of a colt, she evinced no emotion, yet the time had been, and not far

distant either, when the sight of Colonel Terrebonne, mounted upon the bay charger which had carried its master all through the war, brought the warm blood into her cheeks and temples.

Lance Terrebonne was riding slowly, and ever and anon he turned his head and looked behind him as though he expected to be overtaken by some one.

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE MYSTERY.

A FEW words will reveal all. The colonel and the heiress had been acquainted ever since Philippa was a little girl. He often had danced the little beauty upon his knee. When ten years old she had been sent to a boarding-school from which she had returned, six years later, in the full flush of maidenhood. Although the colonel was seventeen years older than the heiress—almost old enough to be her father, as the judge had remarked, yet he fell in love with the glorious beauty, despite the difference in their ages, despite the fact that the war had ruined Terrebonne, and all he had to depend upon was a scanty law practice for a living. With all the honor of a true gentleman he had striven to resist the passion lest it should be said he was a fortune-hunter, and that it was the wealth of the heiress which had attracted him rather than her charms of person and mind.

But, what moth ever yet had resolution enough to keep away from the light which attracted him.

The heiress was passionately fond of riding; every morning, regularly, when the weather permitted, she was in the saddle, and rode until noon, and the colonel had encountered her, quite often, for he too was fond of horseback exercise; and as their tastes were much alike, despite the difference in their years, they became constant companions.

They met by chance, too; there was never any appointment, but, each understood that almost any pleasant morning the other might be encountered somewhere in the delightful little country road.

Terrebonne was an excellent companion—a scholar, a man who had seen a great deal of life, and was the better for it.

And when the two were together there did not seem to be so very much difference in their ages. The colonel at thirty-five looked not a day over twenty-four, and the heiress far preferred him to the rather vapid, callow youths of her own age.

And so the two had gone on in this dangerous intimacy, meeting almost daily until both had learned to look forward with impatience to the time when they should ride together on the lonely road.

Not a soul suspected the intimacy that existed between the two, for none of the city pleasure drivers ever troubled the country road with their presence; the proper "caper" was to drive, or ride, from the city down the shell road to the lake and then back again. On the shell road the two were never seen together. When they reached it, returning homeward, she would ride down, and he up, not by any spoken agreement between them, but simply because both knew that if they were seen together it would create talk, and from giving rise to gossip they shrank.

Yet between the two no word of love had ever passed—not a single sentence that all the world might not have heard.

The colonel was over head and ears in love with the beautiful girl; he knew that she liked him—liked his society and much enjoyed his conversation but he never presumed to think that the mad passion—as he termed it when communing with himself upon the subject—was returned, and he was far too much of a gentleman to endeavor to entrap the affections of the heiress.

On the present morning the girl was later than usual and the colonel had become feverish with impatience.

Bright was the smile that illuminated his features, then, when the girl rode up. Neither in her face or manner was there any indication of the emotion that had so lately convulsed her, so that the colonel had no suspicions that anything out of the way had occurred.

He saluted her as usual and she bowed in return.

"It is a beautiful morning," he remarked, as they rode on together, the horses at a walk.

"Yes, and I am glad of it, for I wish my last ride to be a pleasant one."

"Your last ride?" exclaimed Lance, taken entirely by surprise.

"Yes, for after this morning I shall ride no more."

The dismay which the colonel felt was plainly visible upon his face.

"Why, what has occurred to make you change your mind? It was only yesterday you said these daily excursions kept you alive—that you would not know what to do without your horse."

"I am a woman, you know, and it is the privilege of my sex to change our minds with or without reason; but in this case I am not so

fickle as woman is generally supposed to be, for I have two good reasons for my action. In the first place I am going to be married—"

"Married!" exclaimed Terrebonne, with white lips, although for a long time he had been nerving himself to meet this blow which he felt sure would come at last.

"Yes, and my affianced husband, possibly, would not like these excursions; and then, too, colonel, is there not some one who might object to your playing the cavalier with me—some lady?" and there was a savage, merciless look in the dark eyes as she fixed them intently upon Terrebonne's face.

He was amazed at the speech—the accusation, for so it was meant, and he understood it that way.

"I confess I am utterly in the dark as to what you mean; there isn't a woman in the world who takes any interest in me, as far as I know."

"How can you defame your lips by such a vile falsehood, Colonel Terrebonne?" Philippa flamed out, fiercely, bringing her steed to a sudden halt and confronting her companion with a face pale with anger.

The gentleman checked his horse also, and looked upon the passionate face of the girl in wondering amazement.

"Philippa, it is a terrible accusation you have made, and I trust you fully believe you have good grounds for it, although I know you have not," he replied, quietly, though wounded to the heart by the cruel words.

"When a woman yields her lips to a man does not that give the woman a claim upon him? I am not speaking at random; with my own eyes I saw a certain scene enacted in the garden of a mansion on the river road last night, and I was not the only one who witnessed the scene, for another gentleman who imagined that he was the lady's favorite also was a witness and on your account he quarreled with the lady and broke off his acquaintance."

Terrebonne's face grew as red as fire, and for a moment, man of the world though he was, he hung his head like a school-boy detected in some grievous misdemeanor.

"I understand now," he said, slowly, "and although, for one who understands the world, I have a good excuse for my indiscretion, possibly you will not appreciate it."

"Let me hear it."

"The lady of whom you speak—Heaven rest her soul now—was one of those women who challenge men to admire her. Believe me I do not boast when I say that she has openly paid court to me and sought to win my admiration ever since I became acquainted with her. Why, I do not really know, for I am quite sure she cared nothing for me, and I am not a rich man worth the winning, but I have a shrewd suspicion—which your words just now strengthen—that she used me as a bait to lure another. By seeming to give out that we were lovers she hoped to induce the man, whom she really wanted, to declare himself. Last night by mere chance I encountered her in the garden; she bantered me as usual; I had been drinking freely of champagne—more I own than was good for me, for I seldom indulge now in spirits of any kind. She had arranged her plot, I am now convinced, and, like the fool that I was, I tumbled headlong into the snare. She began by doubting my courage, and declared that, though it was said during the war I had often led my regiment up to the cannon's mouth, I would not dare to kiss a pretty woman even if I got the chance and the lady was willing. Philippa, I do not pretend to be a saint. I am nothing but a man whose fortunes in this life are wrecked beyond all redemption, and who has very few hopes or aspirations in the future; a *free man*, too, whom no one has the right to call to an account. I accepted the challenge and kissed her, but with no more thought of real love for the woman than if she had been a stranger whom I had never seen before."

"Yes, yes; you are right; you were a free man and your folly was not wickedness. Oh, I understand it all now," and she wrung her hands in a piteous way, while tears started into her eyes. "And what have I done, wretched girl that I am? I was so happy! I thought all was understood; it was like a dream, and I did not ask for words or promises, nor think of giving them myself, and now—oh! what is before her?"

"Plighted to her? Of course not; but is it possible that you do not know—have you not seen the newspapers this morning?" asked the colonel.

"No."

"Mrs. Esperance is dead."

"Dead?" cried Philippa, in horror.

"Yes; she was brutally assassinated last night."

"Assassinated!" cried the girl, her eyes dilating and the strangest kind of an expression upon her face.

"Yes, the full particulars of the affair are in the newspapers; one of the reporters happened to be present at the party, detailed to write up the affair for publication, but, instead of rehearsing the particulars of a merry-making his

pen was required to detail the circumstances of a tragedy."

"Dead—dead?" the girl muttered, her brain seemingly in a maze, like one stunned by a heavy blow.

"Yes, assassinated in the most brutal manner. She left the gay gathering in the parlors for the purpose of attending to the refreshments, but, instead of so doing, she went upstairs, and there, just on the stroke of twelve, she met her fate."

"It was his voice then, and in anger, too, that I heard," the girl muttered, but so lowly that Terrebonne did not understand.

"I beg your pardon—what did you say?" he asked.

"Nothing—nothing; I was only communing with my own sad thoughts," Philippa replied, and her manner was so strange that the colonel was greatly puzzled.

"At twelve precisely the fatal stroke was given, and the weapon chosen by the assassin was one of the oddest that could have been picked out—a lancet such as a physician uses."

"Yes, yes, I understand!" cried the maiden, with feverish eagerness, "and the blow was given her right in the throat, and the tiny blade first piercing the jugular vein passed through into the carotid," and with her finger she indicated the exact spot on the neck where Mrs. Esperance's fatal wound had been given.

Just at that time the knowledge possessed by the girl did not surprise Terrebonne, for full accounts of the affair were in the morning newspapers, and the means by which the unfortunate woman met her death were particularly described; but afterward, when he reflected upon the particulars of the interview, he recalled her assertion that she had *not* seen a newspaper that morning, and certainly spoke and acted as if she knew nothing whatever about the matter.

"Yes, and the stroke being a fatal one, death came speedily."

"Whoever did the deed was *mad!*" cried Philippa, abruptly. "No one in possession of his or her senses could possibly have committed such a fearful crime!"

"It seems to have been a very deliberate murder, judging from all the circumstances," responded Terrebonne, who could not at all comprehend why the girl should be so excited over the matter.

"Oh no, not deliberate, but a deed done in the heat of passion—the blow given without a thought as to the fatal consequences! Oh, you cannot understand, perhaps, how one is blinded by passion when the heat of anger floods the brain! There were angry words—a defiance given and received, and in rage the first weapon at hand was used; but, how can any one tell that the intent was to kill?"

The girl was terribly excited; her face was pale, her eyes shone with an unnatural light and her lips trembled.

"Well, it is true that the deadly stroke *might* have been accidentally given, but the probabilities all seem against it."

"How can any one tell but the actors in the scene? But, if the guilty one should be detected—"

"The gallows most certainly awaits him."

"Why do you speak as if the guilty one was a man? A woman may have struck the blow!"

"Oh no; that is not at all likely; it was a man on robbery intent, and when detected he did not hesitate to commit murder in order to escape."

"Some tramp?"

"Yes, I believe the authorities have got their eyes upon a party now whom they suspect."

The face of the girl brightened up.

"Ah, yes, no doubt!" And then, suddenly extending her hand she cried, as she clasped his palm: "Good-by, Lance! May you be as happy as I shall be wretched!" And then away she rode at full speed.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOHNNY ROACH'S LUCK.

"YOU say I bring you-a bad luck, eh?" the Italian boy exclaimed, in a triumphant manner to the tramp after they got out of the court-room into the street. "What you think now, eh?"

"Oh, I knowed we would get out of it, in course," the tramp replied. "I knowed law enuff to know that they couldn't hold us. Tain't the first time I have figured in a court-room afore a 'beak,' by a jugful; but for all that it ain't pleasant fur to be lugged through the streets by a couple of big peeler, jest like as if you had really bin and gone and done something. Besides, it spoilt my fun at the funeral. I reckoned I might be able to pick up a trifle to help me along. I am 'bout bu'sted now, 'way down to bed-rock, as the mining chaps say, and if I don't make a raise out of somebody, or something, before long, I guess like a bear in the winter time I will have to suck my paws for nourishment."

"That is vara bad," and the boy shook his head. "Have you no place your head-a to lay?"

"Not a bit of a place, and that ain't the

worst on it—I ain't got any money to buy grub with."

"Bah! that is nossing!" the other exclaimed. "You are old enough to be my fadder, yet a t'ing or two I see I can-a teach you. You want to eat, eh? Go to ze first house you see, you knock ze door at; when ze peoples come you pulls ze long face-a; you say I have had nossing to eat for t'ree days—you no give me food I die here on ze doorstep-a. You see? You try zat dodge, den you live like a fighting-cock!"

Johnny Roach looked at his companion for a moment in unmixed admiration.

"Well, I guess *you* are bound to pull through this world, anyhow!"

"And why not? ze world owes me a living; it no gives it to me, I take it. Are you-a hungry? Ze first house we come to I show you."

"No, I ain't hungry, but I am dying for a drink."

"Ah, yes, a leetle whisky, eh, you bet! Zat is both food and drink. I like ze whisky myself; it is vara good—it gives a man life—it makes a man strong. When I have big work to do—bad work, you understand? with ze knife," and the boy half-drew an ugly-looking weapon with a long glittering blade from his breast, "I fill up with whisky, then I no care a fig! I strike ze mans if he is as big as ze side of a house."

The old tramp edged off a little from the boy and looked earnestly into his face; he was somewhat in doubt as to whether this was the truth or not. It might be only idle vaporizing; he had heard these "ornaments of society" boast of their exploits before, and then, when the hour of trial had come, had seen them show the white feather in the most cowardly manner. But the boy was not apparently talking for the sake of hearing himself talk, for his manner was quiet and subdued, not the least appearance of bravado.

"Why, you don't mean to say you ever put a knife into any one?"

"Oh yes, and zat is ze reason zat I am here, far from my native land—far from Genoa—beautiful Genoa!" and the dark face of the boy lighted up as he thought of the old Italian city which he claimed as his birthplace. "I had a pal; he robbed and struck me because I was a boy—a child he call-a me; but ze child put a knife right in his heart."

Despite himself Johnny Roach shuddered at the fierce tone in which the boy spoke.

"Well, if you cut such capers as that it strikes me you wouldn't be a very healthy individual to have for a partner."

"Oh, put zat idea out of your mind, my good friend; I am as true as steel to ze pal who plays honest wiz-a me; if he try a game let him look out, for I will cut him to ze heart."

Now, Roach was not a strong man, by any means, either in person or character; in fact, as he had often said himself, when reviewing his past career, he had been a weak fool all his life, and so, like all such men, he had an admiration for stronger fellows than himself, and this Italian, though only a mere boy, was far stronger than he; and the more he reflected upon the matter the more he became convinced that it would be a good thing to accept the boy's proposal and join forces. His cunning and the boy's audacity would surely produce golden results.

"You were a-sayin' that you thought it would be a good idea for us to go cahoots—become pals, you know," he remarked.

"Yes, it is a grand idea, you see, eh? There is a reward of five hundred dollars offered for ze capture of ze murderer of ze lady, you know, and French Louis is ze man zat did ze job. We lay him by ze heels and we—vat you call it?—collar—yes, collar ze five hundred dollars."

"Oh, I'm in with you, but I reckon you are on the wrong track; the Frenchman never had pluck enough to do the job; he's as chicken-hearted in his way as I am in mine. Why, I would as soon think of this hand putting the knife into her throat as of French Louis having a finger in the pie," and the tramp held up his dirty right paw as he spoke.

"But, he had a motive—do you not see? She was his wife: he come to her for money, and she no give it—she laugh at him, and tell him to go hang himself, maybe; and then, in one grand rage he stick her in ze neck, eh?"

"You talk jest like a picture-book, my covey," Roach exclaimed, admiringly. "I tell you, you have got a nose like a sportin' dog for p'ints. But, everything that you have said fits me jest as well as it does that dandified bloke. I was her husband, once on a time, and I won't deny that, jest by accident happening to stumble upon her here, I reckoned it would be a mighty good bit of business to call upon her and ask her for a trifle jest for old time's sake."

"She refused and you struck her, eh?"

"Yes, that is natural, ain't it?" The Italian looked at the speaker intently for a moment, and as the old tramp returned the gaze, he thought that never before had he seen such a pair of eyes, so penetrating, so full of life and fire.

"Blest if you ain't a corker, anyway!" he exclaimed.

"You did not do it; it is not in you to do such a job; it was ze Frenchman," the Italian persisted.

"You're out there, I'm thinking; still, it may be that he did it, but if he did and got the sparklers, why was he so anxious to have *me* for a pal?"

"A trick to cover up his crime, do you not see? You know him—know that he is a man who would not at any crime hesitate for money. He was 'fraid you would suspect him, so he make-a belief he think you do it, then you no think zat it is him, eh?"

"There's reason in that; but, I say, if we go in as pals, you'll have to find the blunt or put up some job so that I kin make it, for not a red have I got now."

"I have a grand idea, listen!" cried the Italian, gesticulating, after the fashion of his countrymen. "To-night we will go and stand on St. Charles street; I plays ze feedle, you be my poor blind fadder wiz your hat in your hand. You cry out, 'Helps ze blind, kind gentlemans, helps ze blind,' and I will draw ze people around wiz my music."

The old fellow made a wry face; begging he despised, but, as anything was better than work, he assented to the proposition.

"Come with me to my house; you are-a hungry; I will make a soup for you," the boy suggested, after the tramp had agreed to go in with him as a pal.

This exactly coincided with Roach's wish, and so the boy conducted him to a low quarter near the French market, inhabited almost entirely by foreigners, and introducing him into a dingy little attic in one of the red-tiled-roofed houses, which looked as if they had been transported bodily from some mean street in Paris, proudly proclaimed that it was his home.

"One dollar a week I pay," added the lad, as he waved his hand around, indicating that he considered himself monarch of all he surveyed. "You think him cheap, eh?"

"Oh, very tidy; it will do." Roach's eyes had fallen upon a good big bundle of straw covered by an old piece of carpet, the bed evidently, and to the tramp's idea a much more comfortable couch than the one he had occupied on the preceding night, which had merely been the lee side of a hedge.

There was a fire-place in the room, and from the assortment of odds and ends in the vegetable and meat line which the lad had on hand, refuse gleaned from the neighboring market, he concocted quite a savory stew, to which the old tramp did full justice. Then from amid the straw the boy produced a small bottle, about half full of whisky, which the old fellow attacked with ardor; after which the two stretched themselves upon the bed and whiled away the time by recounting stories of the noted rascals whom they had met.

In his direct way the boy had questioned his companion in regard to his acquaintance with the beautiful woman who had come to her death so strangely, but, while open-mouthed enough upon other subjects, the tramp was strangely reserved about this, and he always adroitly changed the conversation to some other topic.

When darkness set in the two prepared for their enterprise. A shade was arranged for the "blind-man's" eyes, and the boy hunted up a cane to complete the rig.

"St. Charles street, right below the Academy of Music, is a good place; it is always crowded wiz peoples from seven to nine. We will make a dollair sure, mebbe more, eh?" the boy said, as the two descended the stairs.

"Oh, I don't know anything about it; I can't give you any p'ints in this leetle game. I've had to beg for my grub a couple of dozen of times, perhaps, but I never played no blind-man game. I s'pose I had better fix myself all right before I get in the street."

"There is no need of zat; some time it will take us to walk to St. Charles street, and when we gets there we can go in some alley, dark as pocket, and put on ze bandage."

"That's so; no one will be apt to notice us, and it will be a heap sight more comfortable than to be playing blind-man all the way."

So the two strolled on together until they came to Canal street.

"You know mooch New Orleans, eh?" the Italian asked, as they turned into the broad thoroughfare.

"No, I ain't very well acquainted in these diggings; I've only bin here a week."

"It is a vara fine citee—fine place: make-a mooch money here you get good start."

The two were on lower Canal street, proceeding upward on it, the old tramp next to the curb-stone, and, as was customary with him, his eyes were bent on the ground as he walked. Suddenly he grasped the boy by the arm.

"Stop a bit, Joe!" he exclaimed. "I thought I saw s'methin' shine in the gutter back there. Who knows? it might be a trifle of money."

The boy grinned as he replied:

"Oh, no; you no pick money out of ze gutter, even in New Orleans."

"Hang me if I don't see what it is, though; I'm a terribly lucky fellow at picking up things."

The Double Detective.

I found a five-dollar gold-piece once, lying right on the sidewalk where any one could see it."

"I wish you luck; a bit of glass, mebbe."

The old fellow, notwithstanding the incredulity of his companion, went back five or six steps and began to peer in the gutter, then he uttered a sharp cry, then bent down and picked up some small article.

"I told you I see'd something!" he exclaimed, triumphantly, as he rejoined his companion with his prize tightly clutched in his hand.

"A five-dollar gold-piece, eh?" asked the boy, still incredulous.

"Better nor that; you kin keep a still tongue in your head?" and the tramp looked around to be certain that no one was watching.

"Be no'fraid; no one is near."

"Oh, it's a big 'boodle!' See how it sparkles. A diamond worth a thousand dollars, if it's worth a cent!"

And Johnny Roach opened his hand, and there, upon his dirty palm, shone a bright stone which sparkled in the dim light.

The eyes of the Italian dilated, as he gazed upon the prize, like the orbs of a cat when preparing to spring upon a prey, and a peculiar expression passed rapidly across his face. If the tramp had noticed it, his suspicions would most certainly have been excited.

CHAPTER XV.

A PECULIAR CHARACTER.

"Ain't it a beauty?" exclaimed the tramp, as he ogled the shining bauble. "A reg'lar tearer and no mistake. It would be worth a couple of thousand if it wasn't for that leetle imperfection in the side," and he examined the stone with the air of a connoisseur.

"Is there something ze matter with ze stone?" asked the boy, who still looked doubtfully upon the thing, just as if he hardly credited that a diamond worth a thousand dollars was likely to be found in the gutter.

"Yes, a slight imperfection, but enough to knock 'bout a half off its value. It has been badly cut, and the workman, who was evidently a botch, chipped the stone. You see, there was a time in my life when I was pretty well posted on diamonds. I had enough of 'em, though you wouldn't think it to look at me now, but it was so, and I ain't forgot what I once knew."

"It mebbe zat it is a diamond; but a t'ousand dollairs! oh, zat is big money!"

"I'll soon find out how much it is worth. I ain't very well acquainted in the city, but there are a few p'ints 'bout Orleans that I am posted onto, 'cos when I am in the company of professional gentlemen, cracksmen and sich like, I alders makes it a rule for to keep my ears open. Now, there's a Jew who keeps a kind of a curiosity shop in one of the narrow streets that leads from Canal to the French quarter; I don't exactly remember his name nor the street, but I s'pose I kin find it, and this chap will buy 'most anything if there ain't too big a risk in the bargain. Maybe you know or have heered tell on him?"

The boy shook his head, as the tramp eyed him suspiciously, for Roach was sounding his companion in order to find out the extent of his knowledge.

"Come to think on it, as near as I kin remember, the Jew's name was—was Abraham—Abraham something or other—ever heered on him?"

"No; when I have anything to sell zat is crooked I go to an Italian who keeps what you call a 'fence' on ze levee."

"Oh, this Abraham ain't any common 'fence.' He's no receiver of stolen goods, but if a cracksman—one of the men 'way up at the top of the tree, you know—happens to have any precious stone, not set, you know, but loose, so that it cannot be easily identified, why, Father Abraham, as he is always called, will buy them at a good price. Mebbe I could find the street from the description; there's a peculiar-looking house on the corner. As near as I kin get to it, I think the last name is Cohen."

"Plenty men by that name in the citee."

"Yes, but only one will do for me, and that is Father Abraham. Come along, and I will try to find the place. If we kin raise a thousand on the sparkler, it will be a great deal better than playing blind-man's buff on St. Charles street."

There was no disputing the sense of this remark, and so the two proceeded directly up the street, the tramp keeping a sharp eye upon the various cross streets.

A few blocks above the Grand Opera House, the old-time Varieties theater, Roach halted upon a corner.

"This looks like it," he observed, "and it is about three streets down."

On they went and soon halted in front of a small shop in whose window all sorts of odd articles were displayed. Over the door a small sign bore the name of Abraham Cohen.

"This is the place; I reckoned I could find it, for I have a mighty good memory for a man who has been 'broke up' so badly."

The two entered the store; it was a narrow, dingy little place, dimly illuminated by a couple of coal-oil lamps.

An old man, with a Jewish cast of features, completely bald, and with a long gray beard, sat reading a newspaper behind the counter. He laid aside his newspaper and rose to receive his visitors; his dress was as peculiar as his face, for he was arrayed in a long black coat which covered him from head to heel, a modified gabardine such as his forefathers in the olden time had worn.

A very patriarch was this modern Father Abraham in his personal appearance, and although the two who had entered his premises were not at all prepossessing in their attire, and looked like anything but customers whose trade would be of value, yet the store-keeper could not have received them with more politeness if they had been the richest traders in the city.

"Vat can I do for you this evenings, gentlemen?" he inquired, his voice soft, melodious and insinuating, strongly reminding one of the purring of a well-fed, contented cat.

"I want to know the value of a little bit of a stone I have here," Roach replied, opening his hand and displaying the prize which he had found.

The dark eyes of the Jew sparkled as he looked upon the stone. An excellent judge of diamonds, he was at once impressed with the appearance of the gem.

"Oh, I see; this is vat I calls bis'ness, gentlemen; and therefore vill you blease hafte de kindness to walk into de inner room, where we vill not be disturbed? This is a bad place to examine such costly articles for there is no telling who may be peeking in de store windows."

So the shopkeeper conducted his visitors into a little room at the back of the store. The apartment was plainly furnished, a table in its center on which was a lamp.

The Jew hastened to place chairs for his guests convenient to the table, waiting upon them in the most polite manner, drew one up for himself and sat down, but not until the others were seated.

"I was advised to come and see you whenever I happened to have anything to sell," Roach remarked, "by one of the boys who has had considerable dealings with you. The party is—"

The store-keeper held up his hand.

"Mine goot fr'end, do not mention names, nor is it necessary for me to know who is the party. All de poys know old Fadder Abraham, and when they want to get de worth of their money they come to me. I ish an honest man; I do pisness right up to de handle. I never ask questions without goot reason, nor my customers' names; vat ish dat to me? If de goots suit me and I can see monish in dem, I buy; if not, I dells dem so right away, and de pisness is ended."

"Oh, this is all right and above-board!" the tramp exclaimed. "There isn't anything crooked 'bout this; I came honestly by the sparkler as my pal here can tell you. He was by when I got it."

For the first time the Jew turned his attention to the Italian boy, who had hitherto kept himself in the background, and as his large, mild eyes surveyed the face of the Italian, he puckered up the corners of his mouth in a peculiar way. Though the eyes of the Jew were jet-black yet there was nothing fierce about them; on the contrary they beamed with the softest and tenderest light. No one ever saw "Father" Abraham excited or angry although he had had since his settlement in the city a couple of stormy passages with the chief of police in regard to certain matters. The chief had blustered and stormed after his fashion, thinking to frighten the Jew 'fence,' as he coarsely termed him to his face, but Abraham, on the principle that "a soft answer turneth away wrath," so conducted himself that the burly police chief departed, no wiser than when he came, but in reality a little ashamed of himself, and about half-convinced that the Jew had been wronged and was a pretty honest kind of a man, after all.

"Dis ish your fr'end?" he said, with a nod toward the boy.

"Yes, my pal."

"Dat ish goot; pals are goot when they are goot," cooed the Jew, softly.

Johnny Roach was old and not quite so quick of comprehension as he had once been, but, for all that, he was acute enough to understand that the Jew for some reason mistrusted the boy.

"No wonder," he mentally cogitated to himself, "I don't think much of Italians myself, but he'll answer my purpose well enough now."

The boy, though, never seemed to notice the covert insinuation conveyed in the Jew's speech, but stared at him with the semi-blank expression common to his countenance.

"Well, w'at do you think of this stone?" Roach continued. "I used to be a pretty good judge of di'monds, and I reckoned that it ought to be worth pretty close to two thousand dollars."

The Jew shook his head and lifted up his hands with a prolonged "Oh!". If his customer had said five hundred, he would have done just the same. This was his great point in trade;

he was always astounded at the price that any one wanted.

"Not two t'ousand, mine goot fr'end," he answered; "one t'ousand would be large monish. My dear fr'end, der stone ish blemished." The sharp eyes of the Jew had detected this fact upon the instant.

"I know that as well as you do, and it would be worth two thousand easy if it wasn't for the scratch. But how much will you give—one thousand?"

"Five hundred, mine fr'end, und den I makes you a bresent of feefty dollars."

"Nary time; eight hundred is the lowest cent I will take," and Roach rose as if to depart.

"Hol' on! I will gifes you seven, seeing dat it ish you und you needs der monish."

"I won't stand on a trade for a hundred dollars, so it's a bargain, but you will double your money on it, easy enough," and he put the jewel into the Jew's hand.

"If I make feefty dollars I am lucky."

Then Cohen examined the stone carefully, and as he did so a puzzled look came over his face.

"W'at's the matter?" Roach demanded.

"I do not know, but dere is something wrong mit dis stone."

"Isn't it a di'mond?" gasped the tramp, becoming fearfully excited on the instant.

"So help me Moses! I can't tell. Rachel!" he cried.

A young, pale-faced but really beautiful Jewess girl made her appearance.

"Dis stone, quick—what ish it?"

The girl examined the jewel carefully, then replacing it in her father's hand, said:

"It is not a diamond but an imitation, a wonderfully good one, but not a genuine stone."

With a gasp the tramp sunk down in a faint.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CHARMING WOMAN.

TEN days had elapsed since the one upon the night of which the unfortunate Adeline Esperance met her death and not the slightest clew had been gained in regard to the perpetrator of the deed.

Some new developments had taken place in the case, though.

The firm of Loperleese and Son, bankers and brokers, had attended to all of Mrs. Esperance's business since her arrival in New Orleans, she having come straight from Paris with letters of introduction to them, and the father and son who composed the firm were much astonished when, some three days after the mysterious taking off of their fair client, a somewhat overdressed foreigner made his appearance in their office and claiming to be the lawful husband of the dead woman, demanded to be informed in regard to the state of her affairs and be put in possession of her assets.

Now the truth was that although Mrs. Esperance had been possessed of a goodly sum of money when she had come to the city, and had banked thirty thousand dollars with Loperleese's house in the beginning, yet she had lived so extravagantly, that, not only had she got rid of the cash she had brought with her, but had run into debt to the amount of some twenty thousand dollars. The money had been secretly advanced by Judge Clairborne through the brokers, as detailed in a preceding chapter. And, as security, she had given a bill of sale of everything she had, not even excepting her diamonds or her costly dresses.

When the existence of the French husband was made known to the judge, he scouted the idea.

"An adventurer!" he cried, "who thinks to fatten on what she has left. Wait long enough for the news of her death to reach Europe, coupled with the report that she has left a fortune behind her, and I will wager that the next steamer will bring over a half dozen husbands, each fellow with as good a claim as his neighbor, for such a woman as she was probably had a husband in every city in which she lived for any length of time."

The judge, it was clear, was very much prejudiced against the lady, and the brokers who were acquainted with the gossip of the town which coupled the names of the judge's son and Mrs. Esperance, did not wonder at this bitterness of the father.

So Monsieur Adolph De Belleville, as he loftily termed himself, was told in plain, curt terms that there was nothing for him, as the estate of the murdered lady was not sufficient to pay her debts.

The Frenchman blustered and threatened law, while the brokers laughed at him, and he left in disgust.

Judge Clairborne, in his office, was musing over the affair, the particulars of which had been related to him by Loperleese, the elder, who had just left, when the servant entered with the intelligence that a lady desired an interview with him.

She was admitted; a lady dressed entirely in black, but very richly, and closely veiled. She was tall, apparently of magnificent form, and possessed that imposing air peculiar to women of refinement and fortune.

"I beg your pardon for intruding upon your privacy," she said, in tones the most melodious that had ever reached Clairborne's ears, "but I am a stranger in the city and desire counsel, and I have been referred to you as one most likely to advise me."

As she finished she raised her vail and revealed the face of a woman of twenty-five or thereabouts—a really beautiful face, not only lovely in feature but full of soul.

Clairborne, a keen observer and good judge of human nature, was most favorably impressed.

"Pray be seated, madam," he said, hastening to bring her a chair. "I assure you, madam, I will cheerfully aid you in any way in my power."

"I am from Florida."

"From Florida, madam? I have a great many friends in Florida, and am pretty well acquainted all over the State."

"I am from Punta Rosa."

"I am well acquainted in that section; I formerly owned property there."

"Perhaps you were acquainted with my late husband, General Calhoun."

"Why, certainly, madam," and the judge arose and shook hands with the widow. "I was intimately acquainted with him about twenty years ago, but he was not married then, and—excuse me, but you must have been much younger than your late husband."

"Yes, young enough to be his child, and he was always to me more like a father than a husband."

"I heard of the general's death about a year ago, but I was not aware he had a family."

"There was no family, sir, except myself, and on that account the general's relatives, aided by rascally lawyers and a corrupt judge, have succeeded in wresting from me all the vast property of which my husband died possessed."

"Why, madam, you really astonish me."

"Truth is stranger than fiction, you know, and the tale of wrong that I have to tell pales the invention of the most expert novelist."

"Your husband, I believe, was very wealthy. Some years ago, if I remember aright, he was interested in a Florida railroad which made a fortune for all the original projectors."

"Yes, sir, he was very wealthy, but he had invested nearly all the money he possessed in land, and so after his death I fell an easy prey to his grasping relatives. I was all alone, no one to advise me, and I trusted implicitly to my lawyer, who betrayed me and became the willing tool of my enemies. The judge who decided the case was also in league against me, and so all my husband's great estate was wrested from me and I came here, to New Orleans, almost penniless; my diamonds are about all I have saved from the wreck." And, taking a jewel-case from the little traveling-bag which she carried, she opened it and exhibited a really magnificent set of jewels.

"Really, madam, you did not come so badly off," the judge remarked, examining the diamonds with the eyes of an expert. "These gems are worth a goodly sum."

"My husband paid five thousand dollars for them, and it was always considered that he got a great bargain; he procured them from a party in need, obliged to have money, and not from a dealer."

"You are not absolutely penniless, madam, then, with those jewels at your command," the judge remarked.

"Oh, no; all I lack is ready money, for in addition to these trinkets, I have a claim of my husband for some fifty thousand dollars against an English house which failed some time ago. As a joke, one day, he assigned the claim to me, believing it to be worthless, but only a week ago I received a letter from an agent of the house, now in New Orleans, who is in this country for the purpose of settling up the affairs of the firm, informing me that the house had succeeded in settling their affairs so as to be able to resume business shortly, and that, if I would accept it, they would pay eighty per cent. of the face of the claim—one half in cash and the balance in secured notes at three, six and nine months, which I could very easily turn into ready money at a slight discount if I was in need of funds."

"A most wonderful windfall."

"Yes, sir, for when I receive the money I shall be able to renew the fight for my rights under different auspices. I can return to Florida and compel these knaves to disgorge the money which they have stolen."

"Undoubtedly! Forty thousand dollars is a very powerful argument, sometimes."

"And the reason I have called upon you today, Judge Clairborne, is to see if I could not get you to undertake the management of my affairs, for, with your knowledge—your experience, I feel sure you would be able to snatch from these rascals the property they have seized."

The judge poastered over the matter for a few moments.

"What is the estimated value of the property?" he asked.

"From a hundred and seventy-five to two hundred thousand dollars."

"A large sum. The contest will undoubtedly be a desperate one; you may have to risk the greater part of your forty thousand dollars before the end is reached," he observed.

"I will risk it all—lose all—every dollar in the struggle!" she replied.

"Oh, no doubt in the end you will win, but I wished you to understand that where such an amount of money is involved the contest is generally long and the cost heavy."

"I confide implicitly in you, judge; you are an honorable man, and I feel perfectly safe in your hands. I will transfer to you this English money as soon as it reaches me, and you can use it at your own discretion. All I will require is merely money enough for my personal expenses—my hotel bill and such things."

"Where are you located?"

"Nowhere as yet. I came straight to you upon arriving in the city. I thought that I had better trespass upon your kindness to advise me in regard to where I should go. When my husband was alive we always stopped at the St. Charles when we visited the city, but as I am situated now I thought it would be better for me to go to a less expensive hotel."

"Some private house would be far better. Have you no friends in the city?"

"Hardly an acquaintance."

The judge had had an idea in his mind for some time, and was gradually leading up to it.

"Mrs. Calhoun, under the circumstances might I make bold to offer you the hospitalities of my own mansion, until such a time as your legal affairs are settled? My ward, Miss Lauderdale, will, I am sure, do all in her power to make you comfortable."

There were tears in the eyes of the unprotected woman as she gratefully accepted the offer, and Clairborne, as he looked upon her striking features, wondered why she had remained a widow so long, for surely she was worth the winning if ever a woman was.

CHAPTER XVII.

NO DIAMOND!

"MINE gootness! vat ish de matter mit de mans?" cried the old Jew, when the tramp so unceremoniously flopped down on the floor. "Rachel, a glass of water, quick!"

But, before the girl could return with the water, the Jew and the boy got the fainting man into a chair; his senses had come back.

He still had the diamond clutched fast in his hand, just as it was when the Hebrew had returned it to him with the information that the stone was of no value.

And the first thing he did when he recovered from the faintness was to open his hand and glare at the stone.

"No di'mund—no di'mund!" he muttered, as if reluctant to believe he had heard rightly. "Do you say that this here is no di'mund?"

"It ish not, mine friend; it is a very goot imitation, but it ish not the genuine article. My eyes are old; I cannot see so vell as vonce on a time, and the imitation is so goot at the first examination I did not detect the truth, but Rachel, mine child there, no expert in the world know a precious stone better than she; you no fool her for a cent's worth."

"No di'mund—no di'mund!" groaned Johnny Roach, rising slowly to his feet and still glaring upon the bauble, which really sparkled in the light cast by the lamp like a pure brilliant.

"No, mine friend, I am sorry for you; I would like to have made a trade; it makes mine heart bleed to turn a customer away, but zat ish no diamond und you can bet ten t'ousand dollars on it."

"So-long!" said Mr. Roach, mournfully, as he quitted the inner room and walked through the shop to the street. The Italian followed, but as he stepped over the threshold of the door, the old Jew, who was right behind him, laid his hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear:

"Vat game you blay on mine fr'end with the false stone, eh? or, maybe, it ish some leetle game you try to blay on me, hey?"

"What you talk about? I know nothing 'bout you," the boy retorted.

"You fool him, maybe, but you no fool me. Don't you come here again," cautioned the Jew.

"If I a-want to come I will come; you a-run your own business and a-leave me to attend to mine," and the boy shook off the Jew's gripe, displaying a strength that astonished the aged Hebrew, and followed his companion.

The old tramp swore away at a great rate to himself as he plodded down the street, and when the boy caught up with him, he turned abruptly and said:

"W'ot do you think of it? Don't you think that it was all a job put up by that cursed Jew to rob me out of the stone by pretending that it wasn't any good?"

"Who knows?" responded the Italian, shrugging his shoulders.

"Don't it look to you like a di'mund?"

"Oh, yes; but I am no judge; what do I a-know about diamonds?"

"And if it is so—if it isn't a di'mund, there's a fortune gone right out of my grasp! Why, it's the worst piece of luck I ever struck. I

thought I was made forever—no more misery, no more wandering through the world, kicked and cuffed at every turn, and now the cursed thing has gone up like a balloon!"

Not a single word of this muttered speech escaped the quick ears of the Italian.

"How you a-speak of a fortune?" he inquired. "Five—seven hundred dollairs, mooth money, but no fortune; we catch ze Frenchman and prove he murdered ze madam we get five hundred dollairs; no fortune, but good bit of money."

"Yes, but this was only the beginning—" and then the tramp stopped abruptly and cast a sideway glance at his companion, just as if he had suddenly discovered that he was talking too much and wished to see what impression his unguarded words had made upon the lad.

But the Italian's stolid face showed no sign that he attached any importance to the talk of the tramp, and Johnny Roach felt relieved.

"You see," he explained, "what I meant by the beginning was that with this money I could start into something and mebbe make a strike and so make a big thing out of it; but that is all gone up now," he added with a groan—"that is, if the Jew knew what he was talking about and this here stone really is bogus."

"Try some odder place," suggested the boy. The two had turned into Canal street now and were approaching a large jewelry store, which caught the Italian's eye. "Dere, try zis place."

"But the risk?" muttered Roach, pausing irresolutely before the brilliant show windows.

"What risk—what you 'fraid of, hey?"

"Oh, nothin'; but they might think I had stolen it if 'tis a di'mund."

"Did I not see you find it with my own two eyes? Can I not swear to that, hey?"

"Yes, yes, I don't see as they could do anything, any way; I found it and that is all there is about it."

And so plucking up courage Roach marched into the store.

As it happened the proprietor himself, a Frenchman and one of the best judges of gems in the world, was in attendance.

Despite the appearance of his visitors he received them with all due civility, for it was not in his shop-keeping nature to be rude to any one.

Roach told his story; a poor man he had found the stone, and wanted to know what it was worth.

The jeweler examined it, carelessly at first, for he had no idea that it was of any value, but when, instead of being a common pebble he saw that it bore every appearance of being a real diamond, he grew interested, for gems worth hundreds of dollars were not usually to be picked out of the gutter. Then, like the Jew he became puzzled.

"Sir, this seems to be a diamond, and if so it is worth a goodly sum, but there is something about it that doesn't seem right," he said to the tramp, who was trembling with agitation.

"Say it's a di'mund!" cried Roach, "for the love of Heaven say that it is all right, a genuine stone, and you'll make a poor devil's fortune."

The polite Frenchman looked astonished at the emotion of the other, and shrugged his shoulders after the manner of his race.

"My dear man, I will not deceive you; it makes no difference to me whether it is a genuine stone or not. I will tell you the truth; at the first glance I should unhesitatingly say that it was a diamond, but when I come to examine closely I am a little in doubt. If it is not a genuine stone it is the most marvelous imitation I have ever seen, and it was not gotten up on this side of the water."

"Test it—test it for Heaven's sake, and let me know the truth!" cried the tramp, hoarsely, while the Italian boy looked on in his stolid way, seemingly taking very little interest in the affair.

The Frenchman in the most obliging way complied with the request of the old fellow, and the result was he placed the stone upon the show-case with the information that it was not a diamond.

The tramp groaned in a hollow sort of way, took up the gem and departed.

"The Jew was square, arter all," he muttered, after he had got into the street.

Roach was in a terrible state;—he could hardly walk straight but staggered like a drunker man, so that he was forced to lean upon his companion's arm.

"Never mind! bett'r luck next time, eh?" remarked the boy, consolingly.

"Oh, to think of being dished in this here way!" Roach groaned. "And I reckoned, too, that I was quits with the world for good and all. It's mighty rough, I tell you, to get h'isted in this way."

"Say we vill go and have a drink. I have a dollair and we vill take a glass or two of ze whisky. We vill go down to Girod street, we vill get more whisky for our money there zan at any odder place in ze town, eh?"

"All right; I'm with you anywhere, but a dollar ain't much for two thirsty men. I reckon it would take ten to get me drunk enough to make me forget this here disappointment," Roach moaned.

"Aha, you do not know the Girod street whisky! Two drinks make a man wish to strangle his grandmother."

"That is the kind I want; but here, let me stow this infernal, blarsted humbug away somewhere. I ought to go and fling it into the river but I am going to keep it just out of spite."

"So would I!" responded the boy, and linking arms with the tramp, who was in a state of almost utter collapse, he conducted him to a low drinking-saloon situated near the corner of Girod and Levee streets.

Roach had fished an old wallet from a secret pocket in the breast of his coat and deposited the diamond in it, then had replaced the book.

The boy who saw everything without appearing to do so noted the action, and also that the pocket-book contained a little wad rolled up in paper which looked like money, although the tramp had protested he was penniless.

When they entered the saloon the Italian nodded to the proprietor like an old acquaintance; then the two sat down at one of the little tables with which the place was provided and called for their liquid refreshment. The tramp took whisky while the boy indulged in native wine.

The praise which the Italian had bestowed upon the Girod street whisky was not undeserved for the first glass the tramp tossed off at a gulp fairly brought the tears to his eyes.

"Durn me if that ain't good!" he cried. His taste had become so depraved that the stronger the drink the better it appeared to him.

Three glasses in rapid succession finished Mr. Roach, and the boy half-carried him to his attic home where he deposited him upon the heap of straw, and then, in the most deliberate manner, he proceeded to "go through him" in the most thorough fashion, not even neglecting to examine the lining of his well-worn coat, although nothing but papers could be concealed there.

Had the tramp then walked into the spider's web when he accepted the hospitality of the Italian? It looked like it, but the vagrant, overcome by the drink, slumbered on in peace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REAL STONE.

OLD Abraham Cohen and his daughter had quite a confab together after the two rather suspicious customers departed.

"Mine gracious, Rachel, what you t'inks 'bout dis ting, eh?" the old man demanded. "Where you s'pose dat tramp pick up dat stone dat was goot enough to fool my eyes?"

"Oh, I think he told the truth when he said that he found it, father," she replied.

"You t'ink so? Mine gootness! dat vas a wonderful stone! I hafe seen a great many false diamonds in my time, but I never see a stone dat vas as goot as dat."

"It is of Parisian make, father; don't you remember that when old uncle Shadrack came in, about two months ago, just after he returned from Paris, he told us about the fine imitation diamonds they were getting up in Paris and how difficult it was to tell them from the real article?"

"Yesh, my dear; yesh, I remember now, but, my dear child, I have been hearing that self-same story ever since I vas so high," and he placed his hand so near the floor that it was evident he must have been very young in years, indeed, at the time to which he referred. "Mine gootness! vat you take me for, hey, Rachel? Do you t'ink I believes all dat I hear? Oh, Moses, no! It would make my head ache to carry it all; besides, old uncle Shadrack is such a liar you cannot believe more as one-half he says."

The bell over the store door, which rung when the door opened, sounded at that moment and the old man hastened to the front, where he found a tall man, with a weather beaten face, the lower part of which was hidden by bushy whiskers, dressed roughly with a well-worn felt hat pulled down over his eyes.

By his appearance he was a member of that class common to New Orleans and other cities along the Mississippi and its tributaries known as river men, and this particular river man seemed to be in hard luck.

Cohen had had considerable dealing with these men, as he kept a large assortment of second-hand weapons to which that class was particularly partial.

This caller was a stranger to the old Jew, but Cohen had no doubt that some former patron had sent the man to his shop.

"Goot-evening! I hope you ish well," Cohen saluted, rubbing his hands noiselessly together and smiling upon the other as though he was some dear friend whom he had not seen for some time, at the same time examining him with a close scrutiny that the other evidently did not fancy.

With every detective in the city Cohen was as well acquainted as though they were all his brothers, and he soon decided that he was no officer in disguise and that he had never seen him before.

"Lemme see," said the man, in a hoarse, gruff voice, like one suffering with either a se-

vere cold or else from long indulgence in strong liquors, "I s'pose you buy things hyer?"

"Oh, yesh, my dear fr'end, I buy t'ings, if they are wort' anyt'ing."

"Well, I'm strapped jest now an' I've got to make a raise somehow. The boyees down in this hyer town hav been too much for me, and I reckon the quicker I light out and git up the Red ag'in the better."

"You are from Red river, then? A fine gountry up de Red, mine fr'end. I hafe a goot many friends up de Red; mine cousin lives up in dat gountry. What town are you from, mine goot sir?"

"Shreveport."

"Ah, yesh, dat ish a bully blace; mine cousin Moses, he keeps mit a store in Shreveport. You knows him, eh, maybe—Solomon Cohen?"

"No, never heard of him, and that is funny, too, for I know 'bout all the store-keepers thar."

But it was not "funny," for the cousin existed only in the speech of the Jew. In some mysterious way he had got the idea into his head that the man was deceiving him, in regard to where he had come from, and he invented the cousin fiction, thinking that if the man did not hail from Shreveport, he would at once fall into the trap by proclaiming an acquaintanceship with Solomon Cohen.

The trick was a failure, though, and the fellow's prompt denial of all knowledge of the cousin rather inclined the Jew to think he had told the truth when he had claimed Shreveport for his home.

"Well, to come right down to the p'int, I am strapped and I hev got to make a raise."

"Ah, yesh; we all get dat way sometimes."

"I've got a sparkler hyer that ought to be worth something. It cost me ducats, you bet!" and the man took from his necktie a small breast-pin and laid it upon the counter.

"Thar, what do you think of that?"

The old Jew, whose face generally was as impassible as marble, when engaged in business affairs, really looked amused as he glanced at the pin, for, although the stone in it was quite a large one, and sparkled equal to a diamond in the dim light, yet at the first glance Cohen detected that the pin was but pinchbeck of the commonest kind—brass, thinly washed with gold, and worth at wholesale about a dollar a dozen.

"Oh, mine gootness, mine fr'end, dis ish de worst I ever saw!" Father Abraham declared, with uplifted hands. "It would be robbery to gife you fefty cents for dis!"

"Well, I reckon that it would be robbery!" the man answered, savagely. "Why, I paid a cool thousand chucks for that pin!"

"A t'ousand tollars for dat pin?"

"Right you are—good solid ducats every one on them!"

"Oh, mine fr'end! you hafe been robbed!"

"Nary time!"

"It is brass, notting but brass; you can buy a dozen for a dollar!"

"Not much you can't!" replied the other, in a very determined manner. "As for the pin, I pass on that; it may be brass, for all I know; probably it is; but look at the stone! That's a diamond and no mistake, and I reckon it's worth what I paid for it."

"But, mine goot fr'end, will you listen to reason?" asked the Jew, amused at the idea. "It is not de custom of de trade to set diamonds worth a t'ousand tollars in brass pins worth ten cents."

"I don't care for that! I don't know anything 'bout the customs of the trade, and I don't care; but I know that are stone is a diamond, and if you say it ain't, you're no judge, that's all!"

"No judge!" screamed Father Abraham, indignant; "I hafe bought and sold more diamond dan I hafe hairs in mine head!"

"That ain't saying much; you've got a mighty short crop of hair, anyway."

"A diamond worth a t'ousand tollars set in a brass pin worth two cents!" repeated the old Hebrew, in a rage, and snatched up the article, but as he brought it into the glare of the light, an expression of amazement came over his face.

"So help me Moses! I believe it ish a diamond!" he muttered.

"I'll go you ten dollars to a slap on the back that it is!"

"Oh, fadder Abraham! a diamond like dis set in a brass pin!"

"Never mind the pin; I'll throw that in and won't charge you nary cent for it; but how much will you give me for the stone?"

"Mine fr'end, I vill tell you in one minute. Rachel, my dear, come here!"

The girl entered from the inner room and joined her father behind the counter, and, although apparently casting merely a casual glance at the customer, yet not a single particular about him escaped her ar'us eyes.

"Vat is dis, my dear?" and Cohen handed her the pin.

The girl examined it carefully, stooping down behind the counter so as to survey the stone in the darkness. When she rose again there was a strange expression upon her face.

"What do you say, eh?" he asked in Hebrew, so that the stranger would not understand the conversation.

"It is a diamond worth seven hundred dollars at the least," she replied in the same tongue.

A joyous light danced in the old man's eyes.

"Oh, Moses! what a speculation! This man is strapped, and he will sell for a hundred dollars, maybe."

"You must not buy it at any price!"

"Why not?" he demanded, wonderingly.

"There is some trick in this. This stone is an exact counterpart of the one which the old tramp offered, and which, I am sure, was made to imitate this. It was never set in this pin by a jeweler, but by some bungler who forced the pebble out and then forced this in."

"But what of that?—why not buy?"

"Beware! It is a trap! Can you not see that this man is disguised? His hair and whiskers are both *false*. You remember the murder of this woman on the river road; diamonds were stolen then; you do not want to be mixed up in it."

This decided the old man, so he handed the pin back and regretted that he did not care to trade.

The man received it without a word; the conversation in the strange tongue had evidently alarmed him; he turned upon his heel and departed.

"A 'plant,' father, and you are well out of it!" Rachel cried.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ODD BARGAIN.

Of all the cities in the United States, big or little, none contains a more cosmopolitan population than New Orleans, in proportion to its size. Men of almost all nations can be found there, and with that thirsting after company so natural to the gregarious human biped, Frenchmen congregate in one quarter—in fact, one side of Canal street is almost as Frenchified as Paris itself, and a stranger set down in one of the narrow streets of the Gallic quarter and asked to look around him and tell where he was, after a glance at the quaint old red-tiled houses and the few people sauntering along, most surely would believe he was in the ancient Orleans. In another section the Spaniards dwell; still another, and the numerous beer-shops devoted to the worship of King Gambrinus indicate that the Teuton reigns there supreme.

The Italians, too, muster strong in the Crescent City, and in some of the narrow streets leading to the levee, in the poorer part of the city, there is quite a colony of the dark-skinned children of Italia, and though the great majority of the Italians are placable and honest, pursuing their daily avocations with commendable zeal, yet there are a number of these exiles, who, having "left their country for their country's good," in the New World pursue the life of rapine and crime that banished them from their native paces.

Italy, above all other lands, has been for ages noted for its brigands; there brigandage has been reduced to a trade, or profession, descending from father to son, but of late years the business has not flourished as in the days of the Bourbons. Travelers have objected to being seized, lugged off to some wild mountain retreat and there kept close prisoner until a heavy ransom was paid, the zeal of the friends of the captives being often stimulated by the reception of one of the captive's ears as a sort of a reminder of the peril in which the prisoner lingered.

A well-organized pursuit by the Government of late years has forced many of these gentry to emigrate, and New Orleans above all cities has been favored by their presence. Here in this country the opportunity for their peculiar trade being lacking, some of them lead honest lives, while a few join the dangerous class upon whom the authorities always keep a wary eye.

It is night, and a stoutly-built man, roughly clad, has turned from the levee into one of the narrow streets of the Italian quarter.

Nine o'clock had just struck, and all the low saloons which abound in that region were in full blast.

The street seemed to fairly swarm with Italians; men, women and children clustered like bees upon the doorsteps and in the doorways.

In the doorway of one little house a single woman sat. She was young, fair and far better dressed than the average; a gold chain was around her neck, gold ear-pendants were in her ears, and her really pretty fingers were laden with rings.

As the stranger came up the street, he glanced first at the number of the house and then at the woman, who looked up at the man boldly, like one who was not afraid of any human being.

"This is the place I seek, I think," he said, halting and addressing the woman.

"As to that, my master, I can tell you better when I know what and whom you seek."

"The grandson of Fra Diavolo," replied the other.

"Oh ho! and what do you want with him?" and the woman cast a searching glance at the

man as she put the question. Evidently she felt distrustful.

"My business can only be explained to him."

"Then, my dear master, the chances are that you won't see him. I am his wife; won't I do as well? He has no secrets from me."

"So you believe," retorted the man.

"So I know, and who may you be that dares to talk to me after such a fashion?" The girl, for she was nothing more, was angry, and glared at the speaker as though she would like to accommodate him with a knife-stab between the ribs, after the Neapolitan fashion.

"Who am I?" remarked the stranger, in a jesting sort of way; "well, I am a man; you can see that with half an eye—a man that has business too, with the grandson of Fra Diavolo; important business, too, as you might understand when I address him by that title, for in this country, as you know well enough, few know him by that name."

And before we proceed further we must say a few words about the Italian who bore so odd an appellation. He was a rather undersized man of thirty-eight or forty. As a boy in Italy he had been known as Jeppo Vespa, but at an early age he had run away, joined the brigands, rose to be a captain of a band, and then had set forth his claim to be the grandson of Fra Diavolo, the famous Italian robber, so renowned in history, and under that appellation had achieved notoriety as being one of the bloodiest and most cunning rascals the Italian mountain lands had ever known. For quite a long time he had gone on in triumph, but at last, betrayed by a comrade, the government troops surprised him, cut his band all to pieces, and the chief only saved himself by a hasty flight from Italy. He had come straight to New Orleans, and under an assumed name (Paulo Lucca, he called himself now) had entered upon a new career. He became a gambler, and passed his time in fleecing his more honest countrymen of their hard-earned gains. He was an object of suspicion, though, to the police, for it was suspected that he did not hesitate at either robbery or murder if the game was worth the while. Very few of the Italians in New Orleans knew his secret or suspected it.

The woman reflected for a few minutes; what the man said seemed to be reasonable enough; Paulo, as he was now termed, was in the house taking a nap; he had not been mixed up with any affairs lately, apt to bring the officers about his heels, and as far as she could judge the man was not a detective in disguise. It couldn't possibly do any harm to submit the matter to Paulo.

"I don't know but I will see what he has to say about it," she said, at last. "Does he know you?"

"No; but you can say it is Colonel Black, and that I have something in view that will pay him well if he cares to undertake it."

The woman retreated into the house and in a very short time returned with the information that he could come in.

She ushered him into the presence of the brigand, in a dimly-lighted apartment. Paulo sat on the edge of the bed upon which he had been sleeping, and took a good look at his visitor. The woman discreetly retired.

"I've a job for you," began the stranger abruptly.

"The pay will have to be good!" ejaculated the brigand.

"It will be good."

"That is all right; I work not for nothing," announced the Italian, who spoke English quite fluently.

"Does it matter to you what the job is so that you are well paid for it?"

"It does not, providing the risk is not too great, and the pay is in proportion."

"Would you use a knife?"

"You are playing the father confessor on me. Will the pay be good enough to warrant such a thing?"

"You can name your own price—that is, if it is in reason."

"To use a knife—it is ugly! In this country they hang men who use knives—if they are caught," and then the Italian laughed and showed his white teeth in a manner that plainly indicated that he had used the knife and yet had escaped the gallows.

"We must be careful, and if we are careful there isn't any danger."

"Very true; many times have I seen the rope dangling over my head, but the noose never tightened around my neck yet," observed the cut-throat, boastfully.

"I have a man whom I want you to watch, to find out all you can about him—what brings him here to New Orleans, who his friends are—"

"I understand, I understand!" exclaimed the Italian, interrupting. "Oh, I know the game; I will play the spy so well that I will dog him like his own shadow."

"That is it exactly."

"And in the end is the knife to be used?"

"That I cannot tell now; it depends upon what you find out about the man."

"Yes, yes, I see; if he is dangerous to you or to the parties you represent—"

"The knife must be used."

"Good! Well, I'm your man!"

"Here's fifty dollars in advance," and the stranger put the money into the Italian's hand, making his eyes glisten. "And on this card is the name of the man; he is at the St. Charles Hotel."

The brigand surveyed the name.

"I'll stick to him like the sun to the earth!"

"In three nights I will come again."

"I will wait for you, my master!"

And so the bargain was made.

CHAPTER XX.

MONSIEUR BELLVILLE PROTESTS.

THE firm of Loperleese and Son was one of the oldest in the city; their place of business on lower Canal street had been known to the sugar, rice and cotton planters, trading with New Orleans, for fifty years; and the firm name had always been the same, son succeeding father in regular rotation. Bankers, brokers and commission agents, uniting all three in one, the business done by the house was enormous.

When Mrs. Esperance had arrived in New Orleans she brought letters of introduction from Paris to the firm, and they gladly undertook the charge of her business, but it did not take long for the crafty old head of the house to discover that Mrs. Esperance was not exactly the kind of woman he had been led to believe. She had some means, no doubt, but nothing like the fortune of which she boasted, and then there was a mystery about her that old Simon Loperleese did not like at all, and being of a suspicious turn of mind, and extremely cautious, it did not take much to excite his apprehensions. Outside of the ready money which she brought with her and deposited with the firm she did not seem to have anything else, and yet she lived in the most extravagant style and squandered money as though gold were to be had for the asking. As her agents, Loperleese and Son were naturally supposed to have a full knowledge of her affairs, and yet they knew absolutely nothing. She claimed to own vast estates in France, the revenues of which amounted to a princely sum, but whether these estates were in France, or in the Isle of Skye, Patagonia, or some other place of fictitious repute, was a mystery. No moneys from France or from anywhere else, for that matter, ever came to their fair client through the house of Loperleese and Son, and yet the woman got money in large sums from somewhere after she had exhausted the sum which she had brought with her. The purchase of the plantation, a thousand broad acres, took all the funds which she had deposited upon her arrival; then there was the bill for horses and carriages, three thousand dollars, and three thousand more for furniture and carpets.

Mrs. Esperance selected the articles, and ordered the bills to be sent to Loperleese and Son, "my agents," and the transaction becoming known to old Simon Loperleese, he trembled, for he had not five hundred dollars of the lady's money remaining, and upon his representing this fact to the fair charmer, she only laughed and said:

"The bills will not come in until the first of the month; rest easy; by that time my money from France will come, ten or fifteen thousand dollars, which will be enough to pay the amounts due, twice over."

The last day of the month old Loperleese, who worried as much over this trifling affair as though his own credit was concerned, took the trouble to ride out to Mrs. Esperance's plantation in order to warn her about the bills, thinking it possible, being a woman and unused to business affairs, that she had forgotten all about the circumstance.

"To-morrow is the first, not to-day," she replied, indifferently; "do not be alarmed; the money will be ready."

As this was about five in the afternoon, after banking hours, and the lady had admitted that the money had not come, the old broker could only infer that, with a woman's lack of knowledge of business matters, she relied upon the morning mail to bring the expected draft.

But at ten o'clock precisely, on the next morning, Mrs. Esperance made her appearance and paid over exactly ten thousand dollars in currency, and nearly all of it in small bills, fives, tens and twenties.

The firm was astounded. It was clear the funds had not arrived in the shape of a draft, for if it had, most certainly she would have brought it there to be cashed.

In another sixty days she ran up bills to the amount of a couple of thousand dollars, and again, promptly, on the very day they were due, in care Mrs. Esperance with cash to the amount of five thousand dollars, and again all in small bills.

The mystery was a deep one, and old Simon shook his head gravely every time he spoke of it.

And one day, when the lady came into the old banker's private office and told him in the most business-like manner that she wanted twenty thousand dollars and asked him to get it for her, saying she would give as security all she had—plantation, jewelry, everything, he

was amazed, and had promptly replied that it was not possible to arrange the affair, for no one would be willing to loan so large a sum on such security. All of which she did not seem to take amiss; only said she was "sorry," and withdrew.

That very day Judge Clairborne stepped in; the firm attended to a great deal of the judge's business, and the conversation happening to turn to Mrs. Esperance and her affairs, as a joke Loperleese related what the lady had been seeking that morning.

To old Simon's astonishment the judge instantly said he would loan the money, and then to the old Creole he made known his reason for so doing.

To him he related the same story which he had told to the young man who had called upon him, after the mysterious murder; he feared Mrs. Esperance was an adventuress, that his son was in her clutches, and he desired to secure a hold upon her in some way.

And now for the explanation as to how this secret became known to the judge's visitor who called himself Felix Houma;

A couple of days after the night of the murder, the chief of police had called upon the firm of Loperleese and Son, to say he had reason to believe that an attempt would be made to pass some forged checks upon them, and requested the privilege of placing a detective in plain clothes in the office in the guise of a clerk, so that the rascals might be "nabbed."

Naturally the firm were only too glad to consent, and Felix Houma, dressed plainly then, and not appearing at all like the dashing Creole lawyer who so annoyed the judge, came as the chief's man.

He looked like an humble, fourth-rate clerk, and when seated at a desk, no one would have suspected he was anything else.

Old Loperleese, who entertained no very high opinion of detectives, had taken an early opportunity to ascertain if the man understood French, and receiving a convincing proof that he did not, told his son that when speaking about business matters, they had better converse in French.

But the new-comer understood what the old man was driving at, and so professed ignorance; and thus it happened that the secret of the mortgage came into his possession.

Houma was at his desk when Monsieur De Bellville with a great flourish entered the office, and proclaiming himself to be the husband of the unfortunate Mrs. Esperance, announced that he had "come to see how matters stood," as he had been informed that the firm had attended to all his wife's affairs.

The head of the firm expressed some doubts in regard to the truth of the statement, but the Frenchman, having anticipated this, produced his legal evidence all properly authenticated.

Loperleese examined the papers with all care, as if some heavy fortune was at stake; then he scrutinized the Frenchman with a look that expressed satisfaction.

"Well, vat you say, eh? do I lie to you, monsieur? am I not the husband zat I claim to be?" demanded De Bellville.

"There seems to be no doubt about the matter."

"And the money—the estate, vat you call it—plantation, eh? are all mine, aba!"

The cup of fortune was at the lips and for a moment the adventurer reveled in the prospect of the booty seemingly within his grasp, but the old banker with a few words destroyed the Frenchman's hopes.

"I regret to be obliged to inform you that Mrs. Esperance did not leave any fortune behind her, not a hundred dollars in cash; while her plantation, furniture, jewels, horses, in fact, everything, were so heavily mortgaged, that it is absolutely certain when they are brought under the hammer, as they will have to be to settle matters, money enough will not be realized to pay her debts."

De Bellville's under jaw dropped.

"Nothing left—all gone?" he muttered.

"Nothing, and there will probably be a considerable balance against you, as the heir of the unfortunate lady, which, of course, as her husband, you will have to pay."

"Pay?" hissed out the Frenchman, "pay? Sang-dieu! I will pay nothing!" and in a fearful rage he rushed from the office.

"I thought that last information would settle him," chuckled the old man, turning to his son. Houma seized the opportunity to take his hat and quietly follow the enraged husband.

CHAPTER XXI.

STILL ON THE SCENT.

DE BELLVILLE was so enraged that when he got into the street he hardly knew whether he was standing on his heels or his head. Never in all his life of wild and desperate adventure had he been so fearfully disappointed.

Chance had brought him to New Orleans; he had visited the new world because the old one had got too hot for comfort, for there was hardly a civilized country where "French Louis" was not known and "wanted," for some crime; by accident he had happened to see Adeline Esperance riding in her carriage, ap-

parently basking in the smiles of fortune, floating upon the very topmost wave of prosperity, and as his own prospects were pretty bad, just then, he had made up his mind that his tiger-cat of a wife must share some of her wealth with him.

And now, after all his careful planning—his enforced patience while waiting a good month for the necessary legal documents to arrive from Europe, his palace of fortune had turned into a house of cards, and a single blow had leveled it into a shapeless mass of ruins.

"Oh, I must have some drink—some brandy—or I shall go mad!" he exclaimed, as he strode up Canal street, and entering a saloon he dropped down at one of the tables and called for a bottle of brandy, for nothing short of a bottle would content him under the circumstances.

As it happened, the resort was a little French cabaret, where customers ordered by the bottle, so the liquor was brought.

The Frenchman tossed off a wine-glassful of the fiery liquor as though it had been so much water.

"Aha! Now I feel better! That goes to the right spot," he ejaculated, as he proceeded to refill the glass.

At this point Houma entered the room, and, coming straight to the table occupied by De Bellville, sat down opposite and nodded to him with all the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

De Bellville looked askance at the newcomer; a man of his character is all suspicion; like the thief, "doth fear each bush an officer."

"Well, well, who would have thought of meeting you here?" exclaimed Houma, smiling blandly, without paying any attention to the scowling looks of the other. "Waiter, another glass here!"

The glass was promptly brought—the man supposing, naturally enough, the second guest to be a friend of his first customer. De Bellville, though quick-witted enough, was so surprised by this impudence that he laid back in his chair and surveyed the other with a stare; but when the uninvited guest, with a pleasant smile, and a polite, "Pardon me, monsieur!" reached forward for the brandy bottle, his amazed wrath found vent in words.

"*Sang-dieu!* What are you about, you scoundrel?" he hissed, reaching forward, grabbing the brandy bottle and drawing it away.

"Hush, hush, my dear fellow! You must not act in this manner. Is it the way to treat an old friend?" asked Houma, assuming an injured air.

"An old friend? I never saw you before in my life."

"Oh, yes you have; don't you remember Toulon, old boy?"

Despite the iron-like nerves of the Frenchman, the shot was so sudden and unexpected that it made him wince.

"Aha! You remember Toulon then, if you have forgotten me!" Houma declared.

"Toulon—Toulon?" muttered De Bellville, mentally cursing himself for the blunder which he had made, and striving to retrieve his error by pretending ignorance.

"Toulon, yes; a very charming city; fine wine, beautiful women, excellent water, splendid buildings, superb society, particularly at the galleys!"

"Ah, yes; now that you recall it I believe there is such a place."

"Believe? Why, my dear fellow, you know there is! How can you forget it after having spent so many pleasant days there?"

"Spent so many days there?" blurted out the other, in very well assumed astonishment.

"Why, I never was in the place in my life!"

"Upon my word you lie with an ease and an alacrity that is perfectly charming!" Houma replied with a *sang-froid* that roused the wrath of the Frenchman. His hand was on the brandy bottle and De Bellville's first impulse was to throw it at the head of the cool and smiling stranger; but he refrained, for there was the peculiar look in the eyes of the other which indicated him to be a dangerous customer if roused to action.

"What you mean—do you intend to insult me, you miserable?" cried De Bellville, a prey to both wrath and fear.

"You deny Toulon?"

"I do!"

"Bare the shoulder on which is the brand of the galleys and the red scar will give the lie to your denial!"

"I am no galley slave!" muttered the Frenchman, pale with fear, and glancing around him as though he was afraid the accusation would be overheard.

"Oh, tell that tale to the marines! I know you too well, French Louis, to be deceived."

He was known; there wasn't any mistake about it! The first impulse of the angry man was to draw the knife which he always carried concealed in his bosom and strike it to the heart of this insolent stranger who had so completely unmasked him.

But a moment's reflection showed him the folly of yielding to the dictates of passion. What if his secret was known? What did it matter? It was not likely that French justice was going to reach her arms clear across the

ocean and clutch him for the trumpery crimes which he had committed after serving his time at the galleys.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, assuming an air of indifference, "have your own way; you will live the longer for it. What does it matter to me? I care not what you think, but you are an impudent scoundrel to intrude yourself upon me; you could not do worse even if you were a police spy."

"That is exactly what I am."

The Frenchman started and stared earnestly at his companion for a moment.

"Oh, well, what do I care? You don't want me."

"But I do, and on a serious charge. You were the husband of this murdered woman, Mrs. Esperance; don't attempt to deny it! I overheard all that passed in the office of Loperleese and Son. You believed you were the heir of the dead woman; you thought that all she left would come to you, a magnificent fortune, for she seemed to be rolling in wealth. I have been employed to hunt down the murderer: You know the way we work in France; they do things differently in this country, I believe; but I went to work on the case after our French fashion. For every crime there is a motive—no motive, no crime, unless the criminal is a lunatic, and lunatics of course we do not reckon upon," remarked Houma, speaking in the most matter-of-fact way and checking off the points he made upon his fingers, one by one. "First the woman is murdered—by whom and for what? Revenge? It does not appear that she has ever wronged any one or that she has an enemy in the world. Robbery? It is more than probable, for the diamonds she wore were stolen when the blow was struck. That is motive enough for the crime certainly, but it is clear that Mrs. Esperance was either taken by surprise and assaulted before she could give the alarm, or else she knew the murderer and did not expect violence at his hands. The first supposition is worthless, to my thinking, for she could not have been surprised by a stranger, and from what I have learned I think she was a woman who, though timid and gentle, would have made a desperate fight for her life. No, she was murdered by *you*, her husband, who came for that express purpose. You talked fairly to her, first; then, watching your opportunity, you drove the lancet blade into her throat; you knew where to strike—you were a doctor's clerk once; then you stole the diamonds and now you come forward to claim the property for which you committed the crime!"

The cold perspiration came out on the Frenchman's forehead.

CHAPTER XXII.

GERARD'S OPINION.

DOCTOR GERARD had been one of the principal witnesses at the coroner's inquest, and in common with the other medical gentlemen who had been summoned had given it as his most decided opinion that there had been no suicide in the affair, but, on the contrary, it was clearly a most brutal and deliberate murder.

Against this opinion few voices had been raised, although of course in this case, as in every other one of a public nature, there was quite a number stubborn enough to go contrary to the ruling opinion.

But against the self-destruction theory stood the theft of the diamonds; and this was a knotty point, hardly to be argued away.

On a certain evening, about two weeks after the night on which the tragedy had occurred, Gerard sat smoking on the front veranda of his house in an easy-chair, with a bottle of claret and a pitcher of pounded ice on a table in close proximity.

And his thoughts that evening, as he sat enjoying the pleasant night breeze, sipping his claret and puffing his cigar, turned upon the mysterious death of Mrs. Esperance.

Gerard was a deep thinker, and for some little time now he had busied himself over the tragedy, just as if he was a detective employed to ferret out the truth.

"Decidedly, the more I think about the matter, the greater becomes the fog," he mused, as he threw away the stump of his smoked-out cigar and lighted a fresh one.

Just then a hack, evidently from the city, drew up before the door, and a lady descended. She was tall, elegantly dressed, and, as far as the doctor could see, very beautiful. The house was some little distance from the road, and the rising moon had not yet attained strength enough to show all nature as clearly as by day, which would be the case two hours later.

The lady came straight forward toward the house, and the doctor descended the steps to receive her.

"Doctor Gerard?" she inquired, as she encountered the gentleman.

"The same, madam, at your service," he replied, with a polite bow, for he was greatly impressed by his visitor at first sight. As he had surmised, she was a beautiful woman, and with that peculiar air about her which the world believes can only come from good birth and refined breeding.

"Doctor, I have come on a rather strange

mission," she remarked, "and if you will kindly favor me with an interview," and then she tendered him a card.

It was a modest little piece of pasteboard, perfectly plain, and bore the inscription:

"LADY JANE PACKINGHAME."

"Aha! a member of the English aristocracy," the doctor muttered, to himself, as his eyes rested upon the inscription. "I would have guessed it from her appearance. There isn't any mistaking the stamp that blood and breeding give." And with another bow he said, aloud: "I am pleased to receive your ladyship, and shall feel honored at being able to comply with your request. Will you permit me to escort you to the house?"

"Why not sit here, on the veranda, and as we converse enjoy the sight of this glorious moonlight view?" she asked.

"Certainly, if your ladyship prefers it; possibly, it is more pleasant than being shut up in a room, this balmy night."

The doctor conducted his visitor to the veranda, enthroned her in the great easy-chair, apologizing for the presence of his claret and ice by saying he kept bachelor's hall and was not much troubled by visitors; then he removed the table, brought a chair for himself and stated that he was now at her service.

"Doctor Gerard, as I informed you, I come upon a strange mission. I come to speak in regard to the death of Mrs. Esperance."

The doctor was somewhat astonished at this, it was so unexpected.

"You were, I believe, the first physician who was called in."

"Yes, your ladyship; Mrs. Esperance's plantation is only a short distance below, on this same road."

"You perhaps wonder why I am interested in this matter, but a few words will explain. Mrs. Esperance was the wife of my only brother, Sir John Packinghame. Possibly you are not aware that Mrs. Esperance was not near so young as she looked?"

"I should have judged her to be a woman of thirty or thirty-five perhaps."

"Nearer forty-five, sir; and from what I have heard it is really marvelous how she managed to retain her youthful appearance so well. To be brief, my brother, when quite a young man, met and married the lady in Paris; it was one of those foolish, heedless marriages so often indulged in by young people who should know better. My brother was then a younger son with four strong, healthy older brothers between himself and the family estates; therefore the marriage was a secret one, for his father was an iron-willed, hot-tempered man, and my brother knew he would be cut off with a shilling if the fact of his marriage with this pretty, low-born girl became known. After a brief honeymoon, chance separated the young couple. My brother was compelled to join his regiment, and then was ordered off to India; the girl believing she was betrayed and deserted, so hid herself away as to evade all pursuit. No direct tidings of her ever came to my brother until, arriving in New Orleans, just after the tragedy, still searching for her, for he had received information that she was in this country, and in the journals of the day he read the fatal tidings; he had found her at last, but had come too late."

"A story full of romance," remarked Gerard, who had listened with much interest to the tale.

"My brother, naturally, is greatly prostrated by this terrible shock, and now he takes a melancholy pleasure in learning all that he can of the sad affair; but he is somewhat inclined to believe that the unfortunate woman perished by her own hand, while I must confess that from what I have read and heard of the tragedy, I am of a different opinion, and think her the victim of some miserable assassin. Now, doctor, you, of all men in the world, are probably in a position to know the truth about the matter, and I have come to you to get your honest opinion, if you have no objection to giving it."

"Not the slightest in the world, to you, now that I know the interest you have in the matter, although I should not care to make the affair a subject for common conversation. You have read the published accounts of the mystery, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you remember that I, as well as all the rest of the medical gentlemen who were summoned, gave an opinion that it was impossible for the ill-fated creature to have perished by her own hand? We were unanimous against the idea of suicide."

"I remember, sir."

"Well, I have given a great deal of thought to the matter, lately, and have about come to the conclusion that we were all rather hasty in giving an opinion so decidedly."

"Ah, you think then there is a possibility that it was suicide?"

"My lady, I don't really know what to think; I am in a quandary. Listen to the facts and you will understand: Mrs. Esperance came to her death by a stab from a common physician's lan-

cet; the wound was inflicted upon one of the most vulnerable parts of the human body, right here in the neck," and with his finger Gerard indicated the precise spot. "The blade of the lancet pierced the jugular vein and passed through it severing the carotid vein beneath. These are the two great arteries, but even with both severed, death would not come instantly; the victim would have time to struggle—to make a noise; indeed, cases have been known to walk considerable distances wounded in this manner. Now Mrs. Esperance, according to the best light we have upon the matter, received the wound while standing in the center of the apartment, the stains upon the carpet where the blood spouted out were plainly visible; then she retreated backward to the dressing-case upon which she sunk and where she was found; the blood-stains on the carpet plainly show this. A single scream only escaped her. Now if she had been assassinated, she most certainly would have attempted to reach the door and would also have tried to give more alarm, and she could have done both, unless she was under the influence of some drug that fettered her actions. If she was murdered she was drugged first. But if, on the contrary, it was a suicide, the scream was wrung from her by the unexpected pain of the wound, and then with dogged resolution she stifled the cries that her sufferings should have produced and died a Spartan-like death."

"But the diamonds? who stole the diamonds?"

"Now, my lady, you puzzle me indeed."

And with this theory the visitor was obliged to be content. She thanked the doctor and departed.

Deeper and deeper grew the mystery the further one penetrated into it.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SUSPICION.

FOR two weeks Mrs. General Calhoun had dwelt beneath the hospitable roof of Judge Clairborne, and during that short space of time much had transpired.

In his new capacity of business manager for Mrs. Calhoun the judge had called upon the English gentleman, Sir John Packingham, who was domiciled at the St. Charles Hotel, and had had quite an interesting interview with him.

Sir John confirmed what Mrs. Calhoun had told the judge about the English investment, which had apparently been a total loss, but now promised to turn out so well.

As the Briton said in his bluff, hearty way:

"By George, sir, I thought I was pretty hard hit myself, and I hadn't an idea that the concern would ever be able to pay more than a shilling to the pound, but these deuced commercial fellows, you know, they are wonderful geniuses, sometimes."

Then the judge remarked that the money arrived at an opportune time for Mrs. Calhoun, for now she would be able to prosecute her fight for the vast estates in Florida of which she had been so unjustly deprived.

"Oh yes, she's a deuced plucky woman, too, I should say from what I have seen of her. No doubt, now that she is furnished with the sinews of war, she will make it particularly warm for the rascals who counted upon her defenseless condition. By the by, I don't know exactly how Mrs. Calhoun is situated, but I presume she would like to commence proceedings—carry the war into Africa as soon as possible, so if she needs funds I should be happy to accommodate her, as these commercial matters take time; and though I know she is just as sure of the money as though it was already paid into the bank, subject to her order, yet it will probably be a month or two before the affairs will be settled; so you will confer a favor if you will kindly indicate to her that if she wants to draw on me for five thousand I shall be most happy to oblige her."

The judge, as in duty bound, expressed his thanks on behalf of the lady whom he represented, and withdrew.

So far all was satisfactory, if the Englishman was what he was represented to be. The judge was of a rather suspicious nature, and had lived long enough to understand that he must not receive as gospel truth all that he heard.

There might be some trick in the matter. That Mrs. Calhoun's husband, the general, had possessed large estates in Florida he knew, and that the lady was Mrs. Calhoun he had little doubt, but in regard to the English money and her claim to the Florida property he was not so sure.

If Sir John Packingham was all right it would remove all doubt, so to the bankers of whom the Englishman had spoken as acting as his financial agents the judge went after quitting the St. Charles.

Clairborne was an old acquaintance, and the firm spoke freely when questioned in regard to Sir John's financial responsibility.

"He's solid, judge," said the old gentleman, the head of the firm. "He opened a small account with us and referred to Coutts of London. We took the trouble to wire them, as we are rather suspicious of these little accounts with strangers, and the answer came that his

signature was good for a hundred thousand pounds, and any favor that we could do Sir John would be appreciated by them."

"But is the man Sir John?"

The banker laughed.

"Hang it, judge, if you ar'n't as bad as I was, and I think myself about the most suspicious man in the world! The same idea occurred to me, and so I went to the British consul and found that he was an old friend of the Englishman, had been at college with him, and therefore there wasn't the slightest doubt of his identity."

Clairborne thanked the gentleman for the information and departed, his mind perfectly at ease in regard to both Sir John Packingham and Mrs. General Calhoun.

"She had better draw on Sir John for the five thousand," he murmured, as he took his way to his own office; "the money will probably be useful."

Being perfectly satisfied in regard to Mrs. Calhoun, the judge paid her the greatest attention. In fact the lady had made a strong impression upon him at the first interview, and the more he became acquainted with her the better he liked her. She was so different from the usual run of women, so entirely original, and so well informed; evidently she had traveled much abroad and had enjoyed the advantages of the best society.

And the judge's son, too, was equally as favorably impressed as the father.

To tell the truth, Raymond was somewhat fickle by nature, and although not the kind of man to be impressed by the average young woman of the day, yet when brought in company with a superior member of the sex he speedily grew to like her.

So Mrs. Esperance had bound him to her chariot wheels, until she herself had severed the bonds by her frivolous conduct and love had given place to anger.

The servants in the house, too, followed the example set them by their master and his son, and one and all voted Mrs. Calhoun to be a most perfect lady.

Only upon one person within the mansion the witch's fascination failed, and that was Miss Lauderdale. From the very first she regarded Mrs. Calhoun with aversion. It was one of those cases of instinctive dislike at first sight and the stranger was too shrewd a woman not to perceive it.

Philippa had changed wonderfully during the past two weeks; ever since the morning when she had met Terrebonne on the country road and learned of the tragedy which had occurred at the river-side plantation she had seemed like another woman.

All within the mansion had noticed the change in her manner and all wondered at it, for to them it was unaccountable.

Generally she had been free-spoken and cheerful at all times, but now she had become strangely reserved and even moody in her manner, rarely spoke except when addressed directly, and then contented herself with replying as laconically as possible.

Another odd thing about the girl: she had never seemed to take much interest in the world at large and seldom did more than merely glance at the daily newspapers, but now she fairly devoured them, and if by any chance the carrier who served them was at all late, she was feverish with impatience, and Mrs. Calhoun, who was a very close observer, noticed that all she seemed to care about were the columns devoted to criminal matters. The journals were still surmising and speculating in regard to Mrs. Esperance's mysterious murder and these articles the girl perused with breathless interest—Mrs. Calhoun watching her so carefully that not a single movement on the part of the girl escaped her, although not apparently paying any attention to her so shrewdly did she manage. She noticed that the girl seemed a prey to apprehension when she read the journals, and invariably a weight seemed to be lifted from her mind after she had perused them. Upon such a woman as the judge's guest a fact so strongly significant of certain things was not lost, and in a careless way she succeeded in drawing from the servants, without exciting their suspicions, that Miss Philippa was now acting very differently from what she used to do.

At last, in some mysterious way, the girl came to the conclusion that Mrs. Calhoun was playing the spy upon her, but how she arrived at this knowledge no one could have told, for neither by word or deed did the lady lay herself open to the charge.

In great anger, then, Philippa sought the judge, and without stating what she suspected, demanded to know how much longer the house would be burdened with the presence of "that woman?"

Clairborne was amazed; never before had he seen his ward give way to such a fit of passion; her face was white, her eyes blazing and her whole form quivering with excitement.

"What is the matter?" he asked; "have you and Mrs. Calhoun quarreled?"

"Quarreled? Quarrel with that woman?" and the proud lip of the girl curled in contempt.

"I would not quarrel with such a creature! Why, I have not spoken to her since she came except to treat her with common civility as I would a servant."

"What complaint have you to make against her?" asked the judge, his face growing grave, for he began to have a suspicion that this idea was merely a whim, something that could not be defended and could not be gratified.

The girl bit her lip, and her breath came thick and hard. She perceived the dilemma into which her rashness had hurried her. She could not complain that the woman she detested was playing the spy upon her without betraying herself, and she fell back upon girlish logic.

"I hate her—and I can't bear to be in the same house with her."

"Why do you hate her—what reason?"

"Why? Because I do; but it doesn't matter; I suppose I shall have to bear it," and then as abruptly as she had entered the apartment she withdrew.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PHILIPPA SPEAKS.

THE young heiress was worked up to such a pitch of excitement that she felt it was impossible for her to keep quiet.

At this untoward moment she encountered Raymond; she had just descended the stairs and met him passing through the lower hall.

"Raymond, I must speak to you," she exclaimed, excitedly, laying her hand upon his arm, thus staying his progress.

"What is the matter, Philippa?" he asked, understanding from the expression upon her face that it was no common cause which had impelled her to speak to him.

"Come into the parlor where we can talk without fear of interruption, or of being overheard."

He followed her; she closed the door carefully after he had entered the room, and then came and sat down by his side on the sofa.

They were a strange pair of lovers, for since the day of their engagement there had hardly been a caress exchanged between them. But now they were alone and the moment propitious, so passing his arms around the young girl's waist he drew her up to him and kissed her full red lips.

She did not resist—she did not return the caress; she merely became passive, and a slight tremor shook her frame as though a sudden wintry blast had chilled her.

Her lips too, which she submitted so passively to the young man's kiss, were cold; it was such a kiss as a cloistered nun might have given to her mother superior; all the fire and passion of youth and love were lacking.

"Why do you tremble?" he asked, unable to account for the young girl's strange behavior.

"Do I tremble? I do not know;" and then Philippa looked around her as though she feared some one was lurking in the apartment.

"How strangely you act, Philippa!"

"Do I?"

"Indeed you do."

"I was not aware of it," and she looked at the young man in such an odd manner that he began to fear her mind was affected.

"I am troubled," and the girl sighed as she made the admission.

"That is plainly to be seen; father was speaking about it yesterday, and wondering what it was that made you look so strangely for the past week or so."

"Do I look differently from what I usually do?"

"You have changed completely, and you not only look but you act strangely. You go about looking like a conspirator, or one with some dreadful secret weighing upon the mind."

The girl started, and again she cast an anxious glance around her.

"Why do you start in that peculiar way? Are you afraid that some one is watching us?"

"Yes, yes, that is it!"

"But, why should any one? and who is there in the house to trouble their heads about us?"

"This woman!" hissed Philippa between her shut teeth, while her eyes fairly blazed with the anger which swelled in her veins whenever she thought of the stranger.

"This woman," repeated Raymond, in amazement. "Who do you mean—not Mrs. Calhoun?"

"Yes, Mrs. Calhoun."

And then with the blindness of youth the young man fell into the delusion of believing that Philippa had detected the impression which he was conscious the charming widow had made upon him, and that she was jealous, although, as the girl had never manifested any particular signs of love for him, he was puzzled, for he had taken Philippa to be one of those well-bred, ice-like beauties, incapable of feeling the madness of the grand passion.

"Oh, but this idea is absurd!" he declared, not at all sorry, though, that his affiance had warmed into life from her statue-like coldness.

"No, no, it is not! She is a dangerous woman! Believe what I say, for I know it is the truth, and we must be on our guard against her."

Here was more mystery, for this was a strange way for a jealous girl to talk.

"Be on our guard against her! I do not understand what you mean."

"My meaning is plain enough; she is in this house *as a spy*!"

"A spy?" The girl's words were becoming more and more incomprehensible.

"Yes; can you not see it?"

"No, indeed! nor can I understand what on earth you mean."

"Yes, yes, I understand," the girl murmured, more to herself than to her companion, but he could understand all she said. "She is cunning, very cunning; and it is marvelous, too, how she managed to gain admittance unsuspected here; but I suspected her from the first. It was my woman's instinct which taught me that she was a spy—a foe, and that all she had come here for was mischief. And from the first moment she entered this house she has been constantly on the watch."

"On the watch for what?"

"You understand," and the girl looked at him with an expression upon her face which plainly said she believed he understood, for all his words.

"Upon my life I assure you, Philippa, I do not guess your meaning at all. Why should she come here to play the spy?—what object can she gain by so doing?"

"Raymond, why do you pretend ignorance to me?" And there was a reproachful look in her eyes as she put the question.

"Philippa, you wrong me, and I do not comprehend how it is you have got this idea so firmly fixed in your mind that I understand what you are talking about, for I do not; I am utterly in the dark, and, so far, you have not given me the least clew to the mystery. You speak of this lady, Mrs. Calhoun, as being on the watch and playing the spy. Why should she be on the watch?—on the watch for what, and on whom does she play the spy?"

"I forgot—I forgot; but my head has been as dazed ever since that fearful event as though I had received a heavy blow. Of course it is not possible that you could know the extent of my knowledge, but it is a painful subject, and it makes me sick at heart whenever I think of it."

"In Heaven's name, Philippa, will you speak so that I can understand what you are talking about?" Raymond exclaimed, impatiently.

"But you do understand."

"No, I do not! Explain; what fearful event is it to which you refer?"

"The murder of Mrs. Esperance," replied the girl, in a low and hollow voice, and with another glance of fear around her.

Raymond turned pale, so sudden was the shock, and for a moment his very breath seemed stopped, the heart stood still as it were, his head sunk back against the wall, while his eyes glared strangely upon the girl.

"Forgive me, Raymond!" she moaned, sinking down at his feet, clasping his knees with her hands, and faint with horror, as she witnessed the terrible effects of her words.

With a gasp he recovered himself.

"It was such a terrible affair—your words came so sudden—so unexpected," he said, slowly, evidently speaking with great difficulty.

"Yes, yes, I see; I was so dull—so blind; of course you could not know that I was acquainted with all the particulars, until you were told, and I was the only one who could tell you."

"And do you know *all*?" he asked, evidently mortified that such should be the fact.

"All; I was in the grounds of the mansion on the night of the murder. I saw and overheard what took place in the conservatory."

"Say no more about it!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "I am sick at heart when I look back and think what a fool I have been; but, thank fortune, all is over now."

"But this woman—this Mrs. Calhoun—you have forgotten her," the girl urged. "She has come into this house *as a spy*, and she is a dangerous woman! You have some enemy, perhaps, who has set this woman on your track, who wishes to blazon the past forth to all the world, and so disgrace you."

"Tut, tut; your imagination, Philippa, has led you astray; you are not used to the world, and in every stranger you see a foe."

"No, I am right and you are wrong; my instinct is greater than your judgment, and I guess the truth which escapes you," Philippa replied, persistently. "But, will you remain here and risk discovery—risk that this woman is a spy paid to ruin you?"

"Most certainly I will remain! Do you think I will fly like a coward? Oh no; there never was a coward yet in the Clairborne race, and the world shall not say that I am the first."

The girl rose slowly to her feet.

"The will of fate be done then! I have tried my best to warn you, but if you will stay and tempt fortune—"

"Don't be alarmed; I shall come out all right, but upon my life I think you are wrong about Mrs. Calhoun. I can freely forgive it, for I know it is your love for me that makes you

anxious." Then he drew the girl to him and imprinted a warm kiss upon her pallid lips. "Cheer up and drive these morbid fancies from your mind. There are many bright days in store for us."

And then they left the parlor, he confident and she full of sad fears.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PROOF.

THE Frenchman, as he listened to the words of his self-invited guest and realized how cunning was the snare in which he was entangled, first became enraged and determined to brave the matter out and bid defiance to his tormentor; then succeeded indecision as he rapidly speculated on the chances and gradually comprehended how unfavorable everything looked; and at last appeared abject fear, and the cold perspiration came out on his forehead. Was this man a demon to be able to weave such a net around him?

He broke forth in expostulations.

"In the fiend's name!" he cried, "why do you trouble *me* with this affair? You are crazy to believe that I had anything to do with it. You have made a mistake; I am not that kind of man. Bah! I am no fool! Why should I risk my life and gain nothing? Men of sense do not do that. I am a man of sense. No one ever accused me of being a fool; why then try to stick this crime upon my back? But you cannot do it; you are trying to frighten me; but I am not frightened, no! I have the heart of a lion!" and with a hand that trembled, despite his attempt to appear calm and unconcerned, he filled a glass to the brim with brandy and drained it at a single swallow.

"You have a fine throat," the other remarked, smilingly. "What a pity it would be for such a fine throat as that to be pinched by a rope," and placing his hand under his left ear he made a significant jerk upward, accompanying the motion with a loud gurgle in the throat—a capital imitation of a strangling man.

De Bellville shuddered and again attacked the brandy.

"Are you a devil?" he cried, hoarsely, "that you take pleasure in tormenting a man?"

"Oh, no; a human like yourself. There's my card," and he tossed the little bit of pasteboard across the table.

The other picked it up and read the name aloud:

"Felix Houma!"

The Frenchman shook his head.

"You don't remember me?"

De Belleville again shook his head.

"Not by that name?"

"No, I never saw or heard of it before."

"Very likely; that is my American name," and the disguised spy laughed as though he considered it a good joke.

"Oh, you have more than one name, then?"

"Yes, like yourself I have a dozen—a different one for every country and for every city, sometimes. I'll bet you a thousand francs, though, that if I was to utter the name by which I am known in Paris you would recognize it quickly enough."

"Aha!" cried the Frenchman, eagerly, "and that is—"

"My secret," responded the unknown, with a tantalizing smile.

"What does it matter—what do I care?" growled De Belleville, amazed at being thus played upon. "It doesn't matter if you were Vidocq and all the police spies that have existed since him rolled into one, you would be only wasting your time in trying to make out that I had a hand in this crime."

"That is what you say."

"It is the truth."

"To whom does that truth have to be proved, supposing you are accused?"

"To the judge, of course."

"And jury; remember we are in America, now, where twelve men sitting in a jury-box decide the question of life or death."

"Yes, yes, that is truth."

"Now see how strong is the web which I have woven around you. You call yourself De Belleville."

"It is my name."

"Can I not prove that you have had a dozen and all of them different?"

"Perhaps you can," was the sullen reply.

"I know that I can; I have been two weeks on your track and I have not wasted any time."

De Belleville looked as if he could find it in his heart to strangle the cool and smiling Houma upon the spot.

"You see I came over to this country on a little pleasure excursion, but with my usual luck I tumbled into business," the police spy continued. "I got upon your track almost immediately. You had more to gain by the woman's death than any one else."

"It is a lie!" the Frenchman declared, in a rage.

"Is it?" the secret agent queried, with a mocking smile. "Let me unfold at length, then, the proof which I have against you; then for the nonce transform yourself into a jurymen and judge and see whether you wouldn't

be willing to hang the wretch upon that evidence."

"Oh, you police spies are devils!" De Bellville cried. "I wonder sometimes a man of you is alive. Why do not the victims whom you hunt down turn and kill you?"

"Because they haven't got the pluck, any more than the wolf when run down by a bloodhound; but now, listen to the evidence: Mrs. Esperance was murdered by a little stab in the neck; a very neat little job and one only to be performed by a man who knew exactly where to strike. Then, after being murdered, she was robbed of her diamonds, and the assassin escaped."

"Now for the proof that *you* were the assassin—that you and you only had a motive for the deed. You were the husband of Mrs. Esperance, and who and what are you?—French Louis, a man who has served a term at the galleys, and who is known as a swindling adventurer—if nothing worse—in nearly every capital in Europe. Forced by hot pursuit to flee to climes which knew you not, you came to this country. Here in New Orleans you found the woman, who was once your wife, living in great luxury. She apparently was rich, you were poor. You sought her out and demanded money as the price of your silence. She refused and defied you; provoked by the failure, you take advantage of a moment when she was not upon her guard and struck her, secured the diamonds and fled. See how strong the evidence is?"

"No, no, no evidence!" the Frenchman cried, impatiently. "You must not call it evidence when there is nothing but suspicion."

"Suspicion then; we will not quarrel about a word, but you yourself shall be the judge, and I think you will own that less suspicion has often hung a man."

"You were the husband of the dead woman, you have admitted that; nay more, claimed to be; you demanded that her property be turned over to you, thus making it plain that you believed she had left wealth behind her. You killed the woman that you might inherit her money; you are a man of a notoriously bad character and have done time in prison—just such a man as would be likely to commit a murder provided the inducements were sufficient. So far, you appear to be the only one in the world who had any motive for killing the woman. Come, havn't I made out a pretty strong case?"

De Bellville was obliged to admit that he had but protested his innocence strongly.

"And the diamonds, old boy," went on the spy, leaning over the table and whispering confidentially. "You have them, eh? They are worth a fortune. What is the five hundred dollars reward compared to the diamonds? Do you take, my pippin? Square me with the diamonds and then let the Americans catch you if they can."

De Bellville shook his head.

"The offer is a fair one, you fool! or do you prefer the gallows?"

"I can't," exclaimed De Bellville, in desperation. "I can't give you what I havn't got."

"I'll have to cage you, then," remarked the other, in a tone of indifference. "Since you won't accept a fair offer, why hang if you like?" And he made a movement as if to rise.

"Hold, monsieur!" pleaded the Frenchman, pale as death, reaching across the table and clutching the spy by the arm. "I swear to you by all the oaths that were ever framed I did not kill the woman, neither did I steal the diamonds. It was my game to make her come down handsomely, and on the night of the tragedy I was near the mansion intending to get an interview, but I did not see her. I swear to you I have not spoken to her, face to face, since I have been in this country. It is no use to give me up, for by so doing you may lose the guilty man. I appreciate your offer, and I would gladly accept it if I had the jewels, but I can give you important information about the woman and who were at the mansion on the night of the murder if you will take me for a pal."

Houma looked him straight in the eyes, and De Bellville did not wince.

"Good! I won't crack the whip just yet, then," he answered, apparently satisfied that the other was honest in the matter. "And now tell me all you know about Adeline Esperance and all you suspect about her murder."

CHAPTER XXVI.

WEAVING THE WEB.

ON one of the small streets leading from Canal on the "French" side of that great thoroughfare, so termed because nearly all the inhabitants living in the streets beyond are as French as French can be, was a small cutlery establishment.

A little swing sign over the door bore the inscription:

"HENRI JACOTE,
Parisian Cutler."

It was a modest little shop, but for all that, better wares in its line could be found within than at any other establishment in the city.

Its great specialty was its surgical instruments; it kept a fine assortment and was much patronized by the medical men of the city and adjacent country. It was a great resort, too, for the medical students studying in New Orleans; for the proprietor was a famous master-at-arms and taught fencing, and like their brethren all through the world, the callow doctors were rather wild fellows and much given to exercises with the foils.

Jacote was a character. He was an affected, little dried-up old man, who tried to disguise his age in every possible way, and flattered himself that he succeeded in passing for quite a young man, rather inclined to be wild and partial to the fair sex.

In fine, Monsieur Jacote was just the kind of man to be easily played upon by a cunning and designing woman.

The Frenchman's business, though, was not of a nature to bring him much in contact with the fair sex, although he kept quite an assortment of scissors and articles in that line.

The street was not much frequented, and therefore when the cutler, who sat in the open doorway of the store one evening, enjoying a cigarette, perceived a really beautiful woman, elegantly attired, advancing to his shop, evidently attracted by the display of glittering steel articles in the window, it was no wonder that he prepared to receive with all the honors the, to him, welcome customer.

The lady entered the store, and the Frenchman who had hurried behind the counter thought he had never beheld a more expressive face.

"Is this Monsieur Jacote's?" she inquired, speaking in English, yet with an accent which led the Frenchman to believe she, like himself, was of Gallic birth.

"Yes, mademoiselle, and I am Monsieur Jacote, proud and happy at having the pleasure of waiting upon you," he responded, with a gallant bow.

"Ah, monsieur, I detect from your accent that you are a countryman!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling, the discovery apparently giving her great pleasure.

"Mademoiselle, it is the very observation I would have made, had not mademoiselle taken the words out of my mouth," and again he bowed in a really extravagant manner.

"It is so pleasant to meet countrymen in this foreign land. Ah, monsieur, I do so miss Paris!" and she heaved a deep sigh.

"Yes, yes, mademoiselle; a true Frenchman will always leave his heart behind him in Paris, go where he will," and he sighed, too, in response.

"I wish a pair of scissors, monsieur, and inquiring of a gentleman at the hotel he directed me here."

"Ah, yes; I am proud to say my shop is well known in this city," and the little old man swelled out like a bullfrog in conscious pride. "What hotel does mademoiselle honor with her presence, the St. Charles? The proprietor of that great establishment knows me well; I have supplied him for years. He is a colossal gentleman."

"No, the St. James."

"Ah, yes; the St. James buys here, too."

And thus the acquaintance began. The lady purchased a pair of scissors, chatting the while with such fascinating grace that the captivated Frenchman had great difficulty in persuading himself to take the trifling sum which the article was worth. Had not the acquaintanceship been of such a brief duration he would most surely have insisted upon the lady accepting the scissors as a present, and when she departed, he accompanied her to the door with as much politeness as though she had been a princess, and his last words as he bent himself nearly double with an elaborate bow, was a hope that "mademoiselle" might find it convenient to come again even if she did not want to buy anything, for to meet with a countrywoman new from Paris, that city of all cities, was a great boon to an exiled son of the Seine.

The lady smiled, cast a glance out of her dark eyes which completely won the heart of the old gentleman, and replied that she would most certainly come as she had few acquaintances in the city and the opportunity to converse with a gentleman who had once dwelt in dear, delightful Paris was a pleasure not to be easily denied.

And come again she did, three or four times, at each visit buying some little article, so as to have some excuse for the call, so the flattered store-keeper imagined.

On one visit she expressed a wish to buy a penknife but after examining the stock on hand declared there was not one that suited her, much to Jacote's despair, for by this time he had fallen very much in love with his charming customer, and would have presented her with anything in the store if she had expressed a wish for it.

The next evening she came again and recalled her search for a penknife to the mind of the shopkeeper.

"Oh, yes, mademoiselle, and I am wretched that in my poor stock you did not find the article to suit your fancy, but you, mademoi-

selle, have exquisite taste; these common things do not suit."

"Yes, but imagine how strange that, after my search here, on my way to the hotel, in Canal street, monsieur, I found the oddest little knife any one ever laid their eyes upon; see."

And she took from her pocket and laid upon the counter a small, one-bladed knife, with a tortoise-shell handle.

Jacote laughed the moment his eyes fell upon it.

"Ah, no wonder, mademoiselle, you thought it was odd-looking; it is hardly the sort of penknife suited to a lady; it is a physician's lancet," and as he spoke he opened the blade.

"Yes, yes, I see now, and how stupid it was of me not to guess what it was before."

"Oh, no, mademoiselle; you are not used to such things, while I, on the contrary, deal largely in them. In fact it would be no great risk to bet a bottle of wine that this very lancet was bought in this store, I sell so many."

"A lancet!" exclaimed the lady, reflectively; "let me see, that seems very familiar to me. Whom have I heard talking of a lancet lately?"

Jacote shrugged his shoulders after the true French fashion.

"Ah, yes, now I have it!" she cried, abruptly. "I knew that I had been hearing some one talk of a lancet lately; it was that terrible murder case; she was killed by a stab from a lancet; it was dreadful, was it not? and to think that this little toy should be able to give a wound severe enough to cause death!"

"Oh, yes, mademoiselle; if the blow be given in the right place; life is a fragile thing, sometimes."

"What was the name of the lady who was murdered?"

The Frenchman shook his head.

"It was in all the newspapers—a horrid case. Just outside the city, on a river plantation, I believe."

Again Jacote shook his head.

"Really, mademoiselle, I read the newspapers so little I am quite ignorant, and I never read about murders."

"And you say you think this little knife was bought here?"

"It is possible," and then he examined it carefully, while the lady watched, an eager, wolfish look in her eyes despite all her efforts to repress her tiger-like feelings.

"Yes, mademoiselle, it was bought here, and, what is more, I can tell you who bought it," Jacote exclaimed, in a tone of triumph, eager to show his fair charmer what a cunning fellow he was. "You see, mademoiselle, I have such a wonderful memory for trifles, particularly for trifles connected with my trade. If there is even a scratch upon any tool I sell, I never forget it and can always pick out the one I sold from a dozen others exactly like it."

"And were there any scratches—any marks upon this lancet?"

The question was put as coolly as though a human life hung not on the balance.

"Yes, yes, and you will be able to see them when I point them out. Notice the plate on the side of the handle; there is a little scratch there at the end of the plate, as if the tortoise shell had been cracked by the insertion of the plate; then here on the blade, see how blurred the S is in the word Sheffield."

"Why, is it not wonderful? You would be able to identify and swear to this knife before a court of justice."

"Before a dozen courts, my dear mademoiselle!" Jacote replied, delighted at the interest which he had excited.

"But, the gentleman to whom you sold it—I must return it; have you his address?"

"I think I have his card," and he went to his desk, fumbled over his papers, and presently returned with the pasteboard. "Here it is."

She glanced at the name inscribed upon the card and her brows contracted for a moment; then she smiled sweetly upon Jacote as she possessed herself of the lancet, and said:

"I will see that it is returned," then departed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SPY SPEAKS.

ONE month from the day of the murder of Adeline Esperance, and in all that time the authorities of the city were not a bit the wiser in regard to the slayer of the woman; not a single clew had they gained; and even the noted French detective, who had been introduced to the chief of police by the Englishman, had been obliged to confess that the mystery was a deep one, and that, so far, he was not able to see into it; but he appeared full of confidence and said that he would devote at the least a couple of more months to the case, for he had become deeply interested in it, and in these strange affairs it was his experience that light sometimes appeared when everything looked darkest.

The chief had winked significantly to one of his associates, after the Frenchman had retired, and had observed:

"Brag is a good dog, but holdfast is better, and I reckon that brag is Johnny frog-eater's best holt! Nary time will we put the bracelets on the chap that did this job, for it's ten to one

that he skipped out, either up North or over into Texas the moment he got hold of the swag."

Even the Englishman, although possessed of all the bull-dogism for which the Briton has been credited, at last began to lose hope.

In obedience to the request of the lady, whose services he had engaged, he had taken a small office in St. Charles street, right in the busy part of the city, and in a building filled with offices, so that any one passing up or down, man or woman, would not be apt to attract any particular attention.

"It is necessary," she explained, "for us to have some place where we can meet without danger of being observed. The more I see of this matter—the deeper I penetrate into it, the more I become convinced that we have a most difficult and dangerous task before us, and if the doer of the deed once becomes suspicious discovers that there is a spy after him, who is likely to hit upon the right track, most surely he will not stop at any means to remove the tracker."

Although by this speech Sir John got the idea that his spy had obtained a clew, yet, in response to his eager questioning, she declared that as yet she had not found out anything worth talking about, and resolutely declined to say anything further.

"Let me alone until I really get some information!" she said. "I have made some guesses, it is true, but guesses are not worth anything; there isn't any substance to them, wait until I get hold of the tail of my rat before I describe the animal. When I have anything to say I will send you a postal-card on which I will simply inscribe the day and time when I wish to meet you here."

And this was all the satisfaction the Englishman was able to obtain. There was nothing to do but wait; and so, with all the doggedness of his race, he bided his time, fully determined to spend ten years in the search, and half his fortune if need be, to secure the vengeance he craved.

Four weeks passed away and no word from La Marmoset, for it was the famous police spy whom he had enlisted in his service, but at the end of that time, just as he had begun to believe that the mystery was too great even for La Marmoset to handle, and that even her keen wits had been baffled by the precautions taken by the murderer to conceal all traces by means of which the foul deed could be traced to its author, he found a postal-card in his box at the hotel, which simply said:

"To-morrow—twelve, noon."

At ten minutes before the appointed time the Englishman was in the office, waiting for his spy.

At twelve precisely a lady made her appearance. She was dressed plainly in complete black, wore her hair arranged down over her forehead, after the fashion common some thirty years ago, and by this means had entirely changed the expression of her mobile face, in a measure concealing its beauty, adding the appearance of at least ten years to her age. She looked like a woman of forty or forty-five, and one who had seen much trouble; very meek and humble-looking indeed; the last person from whom any one would have expected danger.

"I beg your pardon," she said, looking about her in a timid sort of way, as if she saw she had made a mistake and got into the wrong room.

"Who did you wish to see, madam?" he asked.

The woman did not answer the question, but turning around went to the door, which in the coolest manner she locked, the key happening to be on the inside.

Sir John jumped to his feet in alarm, for the movement astounded him.

"Hallo, madam, what are you about? Unlock that door!" he cried.

"Oh, no, Sir John; we mustn't be interrupted!" she said, speaking now in tones which he instantly recognized, and turning she pushed the hair up from her temples, and behold! it was La Marmoset!

"By Jove!" was all that the Englishman could ejaculate.

"A pretty good disguise since it deceived you, and yet you expected me!" she observed, a touch of triumph in her manner.

"You are a trump, madam, upon my word!" the Briton declared, hastening to bring her a chair.

She seated herself and laughed quietly for a moment.

"I am rather out of practice; I have not pursued my trade since coming to this country, and I had a fancy to try you with a disguise and see whether I had lost all my cunning or not."

"Most decidedly you have not. Although when you opened the door I expected it was you, yet your disguise was so perfect that I took you for a stranger; but now that I come to look at you, I fail to perceive that you have altered yourself materially."

"It is knowing how to do it, my brave," she explained. "But now to business."

"Yes, yes, what have you discovered?"

"Not much."

"Oh!"

"But I suspect a great deal."

"Ah, but you said that suspicion didn't amount to anything."

"No more does it, but it puts us on the right scent sometimes; but see, there is one thing I want to understand, for I think that, in a measure, I have been working in the dark."

"What is it?"

"What kind of a woman was this Adeline Esperance, anyway?"

"An angel!" exclaimed Sir John, fervently.

"Oh, that is what *you* think, eh?" and a peculiar expression appeared upon her face.

"Why, I know she was; but your tone and the expression upon your face would seem to imply that you doubted it."

"Personally I know nothing of the woman, of course; I did not know that she even had existed until you put me upon the track. But when you employed me in this matter the first thing I did was to try and find out all I could about her."

"And you succeeded?"

"Admirably! but the weight of the evidence is decidedly against her being an angel."

"Is it possible?" And the Englishman looked amazed.

"It is, and that is one thing I wanted to talk to you about. I have got the story you told me all written down here," and she tapped her broad forehead. "I never trust my memorandums to books which are apt to be lost. Adeline Esperance was your wife; you married her in Paris, secretly, you being then a younger son entirely dependent upon your father. You were called to join your regiment—were obliged to leave in haste—wrote from England when you found you were booked for India and never received any replies."

"Yes, but after my return I found that my letters had been intercepted by a rival who succeeded in persuading my beloved one that I had betrayed and deserted her."

"From whom did you receive this information?"

"The woman who kept the lodging-house where we had resided after we were married so informed me."

"And how did *she* know?"

"My wife told her; she was in distress and confided her secrets to her. She had not heard from me, and believing that she had been betrayed she was about to leave Paris and seek for better fortune elsewhere, in company with a French gentleman, who was an old friend and had promised to assist her. Then when I told the woman that I had written at least a dozen letters, none of which were answered, she at once declared that she had no doubt Adeline had been the victim of a diabolical plot. She had confided all her affairs to this Frenchman, and the inference was plain, he had intercepted the letters and persuaded Adeline that she had been deceived and abandoned in order to make her his victim. Then I resolved to devote the rest of my life to finding her."

"How many years ago did this marriage take place?"

"Exactly twenty years have elapsed."

"Since you married this angel?"

"Yes."

"Who had two living husbands then."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LA MARMOSET'S CONCLUSIONS.

SIR JOHN stared and put on his eyeglasses in order that he might the better examine the woman who had made this astounding declaration.

"Oh, it is the truth; you need not stare as if you doubted my words. I repeat, you were her *third* husband, and instead of being the young, pure and virtuous girl of eighteen that you believed she was a woman of twenty-seven, an adventuress of the first water, ever on the look-out for prey. I understand all about it; I have seen a thousand in my time in Paris, and have snapped the bracelets on not a few of them either, and you Englishmen throw away so much money in Paris that all these creatures believe every John Bull is a milord and as rich as a Russian prince. She snapped you up for a victim, or perhaps there may have been a trifle of love about the matter. Anyway, when you went back to England she seized upon the opportunity to free herself from the tie which bound her so that she might be able to snare fresh prey. Of course if she had had any idea that you would inherit the family estates, she would have stuck to you like a leech."

"I can hardly bring myself to believe this story can be true," remarked Sir John, sadly, for the revelation had been a heavy blow to him; all these years he had cherished the memory of his girl-wife and looked forward with joy to the day when he should again clasp her to his heart.

"There is not the least doubt about its truth," La Marmoset persisted. "Husbands No. 1 and 2 are both present, here in New Orleans. No. 1 is rather under the weather just now and is not in fine feather, and so is keeping in the background, but No. 2 has openly come forward and put in a claim for the prop-

erty left by the dead woman, and he has got all the legal papers which prove that he was married to Adeline Esperance just twenty-two years ago; that was two years before your marriage, and No. 1 claims to have been wedded to her twenty-seven years ago, and I see no reason to doubt the truth of the statement."

The Englishman muttered something that sounded very much like an oath. It was mortifying to think the idol which he had worshiped for so many long years was nothing but very common clay, after all. The fact galled him to the heart.

"But is not there a possibility of some mistake? The Adeline Esperance of these fellows and *my* Adeline Esperance may be two entirely different persons. Such mistakes have been made."

"You saw the woman before she was buried?"

"Yes."

"And it was your Adeline?"

"It was; no doubt about it, and very little changed indeed; twenty years had scarcely aged her a particle."

"Exactly; she was probably twenty-five or thereabouts when she married you, and she claimed to be eighteen, and here in New Orleans she only owned to twenty-four. Well, you saw her dead, and recognized her as your wife; the other two saw her living and they also recognized her."

"And these two husbands—were they in communication with her?"

"No; yet I feel sure both of them intended to make the woman pay well for their silence."

"Were they acting in concert?"

"No; although they were acquainted, yet neither one knew the other was in this country, or had the slightest suspicion he was in any way connected with Mrs. Esperance until after the tragedy, when they happened to meet and compare matters, and then discovered, to their mutual surprise, that both had the same claim on her."

"And one of these fellows, I suppose, was her assassin, for I gather from what you have said that both are of bad reputations."

La Marmoset shook her head.

"It is a strange case—as difficult a one as I ever handled," she replied, after a pause. "I confess I don't know exactly what to think. I have discovered circumstantial evidence tolerably strong against both, yet I know that both could not have been concerned in the tragedy, for they did not meet until the deed was done—in fact, not until two or three days after. Besides, I have proof which seems to fix the bloody deed upon an entirely different person."

"Well, that is strange."

"The apple is not ripe yet, and I shall not shake the tree until it is. The affair bothers me! I have clews, but too many; they can't all be right, and yet one seems to promise as much as another. The trouble is the *motive*. So far I cannot discover *why* the woman was killed. Murders are not committed, you know, without good reasons, except by lunatics, but I have not been able to discover any connected with this case. The mystery surrounding Mrs. Esperance even I have not been able to solve."

"What mystery? I do not exactly understand."

"What was the woman doing here, living like a princess, spending a thousand dollars for this and a thousand dollars for that, with no more apparent care for the cash than if she had a king at her back to provide her with pocket-money?"

"It is strange."

"There must have been an 'angel' somewhere?"

"An angel?" inquired Sir John.

"I see; you do not understand the thieves' argot. An angel is a rich man—a flat, who provides the money."

"Yes, yes; I presume I was her 'angel' once, although in a limited way," the Englishman remarked.

"Some one was in the background, her angel, who supplied her with money, and the rat, whoever he is, has covered up his tracks so well that I cannot get the slightest clew. No checks, no telltale large bills, but always small ones, impossible to trace. That is the way the money came to her, and she spent it as freely as water; all women who have angels do that; what do they care for money since it can be had for the asking?"

"What you have said gives me much food for thought," Sir John observed.

"No doubt; it must be something of a shock to a man to suddenly discover that the woman whose memory for years he has cherished in his breast, believing her to be all that was good and holy, was nothing but a wily adventuress, ready to sell herself to the first comer provided the price was high enough."

"And you are sure that it was so?" asked the Englishman, as if a doubt still lingered in his breast.

"It is certain; there is not the least doubt

about it. How hard it is for a man to believe that to be true which he wishes to be false."

Sir John winced at the remark, for he felt its truth.

"But, now that you know all, what is to be done?" she continued. "Am I to keep on in the chase or give it up?"

"Keep on!" cried he, decidedly. "I have grown doubly interested, and, no matter whether she was saint or devil, I will do all that man can do to bring her murderer to justice."

"Good! I am glad of it, for I am interested, too; I don't like to be baffled, and so far I must confess I have not made much progress. Now I will tell you how the matter stands: There are three men who may have committed the deed, and I have ascertained facts which seem to implicate all three, yet I feel tolerable certain that only one had a hand in it. First comes husband No. 1; he is a regular tramp, old, weather-beaten and miserable, who in a moment of anger at being refused the money he sought might have struck the blow, although he can't bring myself to believe he could ever have mustered courage enough to do such a thing. He is the sort of fellow who would rob a hen-roost or steal the washing from a clothesline, but would require a deal of urging to commit more desperate work. He knew the woman; he was her husband—the first one so far as I have discovered, although it is possible he may have been No. 6 instead of No. 1. He was in the neighborhood of the mansion on the night of the murder and had in his possession after the tragedy an imitation diamond, which he believed to be a genuine stone, and which I feel satisfied was one of the jewels stolen on the night of the murder from the dead woman."

"Ah, that is proof conclusive!"

"Oh, no, my dear Sir John, it is not. I have been studying the matter over, and am not sure that the man who struck the blow was the one who committed the robbery. According to the accounts given the jewels were on the person of the woman when she was discovered by the guests in the house struggling in the agonies of death; then she was left alone for a few minutes while the grounds without were searched for traces of the assassin, and when the guests returned the gems were gone. You see two may have participated in the crime."

"Yes, it is possible."

"Against husband No. 2 there is little evidence. He is of noted bad character, desperate enough to do such a deed if pushed to it, and, apparently, would profit more by the woman's death than any one else."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A POSSIBLE CLEW.

PACKINGHAME shook his head.

"The evidence against No. 2 does not strike you as being very strong?" La Marmoset queried.

"It does not, indeed—mere surmise."

"You are right; it doesn't amount to anything, but he is a sly and skillful fellow, an old rogue used to covering up his tracks, who, if he did the job, would take precious good care to arrange it so that suspicion would not fall upon him. By chance he discovered the woman here, and, to all outward seeming, possessed of plenty of money. She was fair game; she must share her gold with him or he would reveal to the world the relationship which existed between them; so he sent to Europe for the necessary legal documents to prove that he was her husband, and they arrived a few days before the date of the murder. She would not yield to the demand and defied him; then he determined to kill her, thinking that he was her heir and that on her death he would inherit the plantation which was supposed to be hers but which was, in reality, mortgaged for all it was worth. You see, apparently, he had a great deal to gain by her death—more than any one else that I have been able to connect with the case, so far, except the 'angel' perhaps."

"Do you think—supposing there was some man in the background furnishing the money she squandered so freely—that he had anything to do with it?"

"Wait a moment; I will come to the angel presently. There is a No. 3 that I haven't disposed of yet."

"Another husband?"

"Oh, no; you are No. 3 in the husband line as far as I am able to find out. I speak of the third one against whom I have some proof—terribly strong circumstantial evidence, and yet I cannot bring myself to believe that he had anything to do with it."

"Go on, I pray; this is like a three-volume novel."

"What fiction can compare with truth? But No. 3 is a young man whom this siren fascinated, just as she seems to have fascinated everybody she encountered. And he was as good as engaged to be married, too, to a beautiful young girl—a creature worth a dozen such women as this siren, if I am any judge; but as to that, I suppose women are poor judges of each other. He was a visitor at the house on the night of the murder. A party was given there, if you remember, that night."

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Packingham nodded; not a single detail connected with the tragedy which was not indelibly engraved upon his memory.

"I have been singularly lucky in one respect; I know about as much of what transpired in and around the mansion on that eventful night as though I had been an eye-witness. Mrs. Esperance had been carrying on a desperate flirtation with this young man, but exactly how far the thing had gone I am not able to discover; whether she had succeeded in trapping the young fellow into a marriage engagement or not is not yet known. But on that night, with that evil spirit which seems to rule such women sometimes, she paid particular attention to another one of her visitors, a colonel, a dashy, handsome gentleman, but far too poor for such a woman to waste time upon; yet, on this particular evening, she encouraged his attentions and bantered him into kissing her, and as it happened the salute was witnessed by the young man, the very man of all men who should not have seen the act. It seemed to open his eyes, though, and the result was a quarrel between himself and Mrs. Esperance, followed by his withdrawal from the house. The particulars of that interview I cannot get at, and the chances are great that what took place between the two is known only by the dead woman and the living man. He left the house about half-past eleven; the woman was killed on the stroke of twelve; the man did not arrive at his home in this city until about one, taking an hour and a half for a journey which he could easily accomplish in three quarters of an hour at the most, and could do in half an hour if he was in haste. The time of his leaving the mansion and the hour at which he arrived at his destination in this city can be verified by competent witnesses. There was ample time for him to return to the house, commit the deed and reach the city at the hour he did; but if he did not do this, how did he use up the hour and a half?"

"With what infernal cunning you draw the web around the man!" cried Sir John, amazed at the woman's skill.

"I have hardly commenced with him yet. Wait! I have shown there was time for him to do the deed. Now for the motive: he had quarreled with the woman, and as near as I can get at it, he had said that he would never see her again. Suppose, however, she had some hold on him? That is the first thing these dangerous women try for; they do their best to bind their victims so that the chain cannot be broken. So, when he told her that that meeting must be their last, suppose the woman threw off the mask, revealed the power she possessed and defied him to break with her?"

"I see, I see; then death alone could break the bond."

"Exactly; he rides away brooding over the matter, becomes desperate when he sees how completely he is in the woman's power, and determines at any risk to free himself."

"Yes, yes; the motive is a strong one. I can understand how a young man of good family, infuriated at finding himself in the power of such a creature might be tempted even to murder."

"The opportunity—the motive—I have shown."

"Yes, reasonably."

"And the weapon—"

"The lancet, yes!" exclaimed the Englishman, growing excited at the development.

"The young man is a medical student!"

"Aha! You have him, then, beyond a doubt! Of course he would know exactly where to strike to inflict a fatal blow, and such an instrument—"

"He would be apt to have handy in his pocket, eh?"

"Yes, and without preparation either."

"Well, I have traced the lancet with which the deed was done to the very shop where it was bought. That is what the police owls ought to have tried to accomplish in the first place."

"Certainly; and now if you can prove that the young man was the one who purchased the lance—"

"That is accomplished, sir," La Marmoset replied, with a smile at the look of amazement which came over the Englishman's face. "The chapter of accidents decreed that there should be certain marks upon the lancet by means of which it could be identified, and the man who sold it knew it at once and gave me the card of the purchaser."

"The chain is complete; nothing remains but to denounce the murderer to the proper authorities; and yet, from what you said in the beginning, I was led to infer that very little had been accomplished, while, on the contrary, you have weaved a network of proof around the guilty one from which there is no escape."

"And you think on this evidence the man could be convicted?" asked La Marmoset, a peculiar expression upon her face.

"Most certainly! Can there be a doubt of his guilt?"

"Yes, in my mind," was the woman's surprising answer.

The Englishman opened his eyes.

"You don't understand; wait a bit. There

is a No. 4 in this affair of whom I have not yet spoken, and who is a very mysterious personage indeed."

"By Jove! the mysteries of this murder beat the 'Three Spaniards,' and that book used fairly to make my hair stand on end as a boy when I read it."

"No. 4 is a slight young man, dressed entirely in black, with a hat pulled down over his eyes, as if he was afraid of being recognized. He rode a black horse with a white blaze in the forehead and white hind feet; looks altogether, as near as I can make out, like a Creole planter. On the night of the tragedy he was seen in the neighborhood of the plantation; first mounted on the black horse and then on foot skulking through the grounds of the house as though he feared recognition."

"I am really getting bewildered," Sir John remarked. "Whom do you suppose this party to be?"

"The angel—the man in the background who supplied the money, and who on this night not only witnessing the flirtation of Mrs. Esperance with the colonel, but also her lover-like quarrel with the young medical student, satisfied that the woman was betraying him, and perhaps tiring of her reckless extravagance, determined at a single blow to rid himself of the siren, who must have been ruining him."

"But the lancet belonging to the other?"

"They may be friends for all any one knows—the lancet lent or stolen."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"And until I discover who No. 4 is I make no accusation. You see I was right when I said not much had been accomplished," and she rose.

"Is that all?"

"All at present, but I may light upon my gentleman at any time."

"You will succeed, I am sure of it."

"I am determined to succeed."

And so the interview ended.

CHAPTER XXX.

PLANNING A MURDER.

AT nine o'clock on a certain evening the Italian, who proudly boasted that he was a grandson of the once renowned brigand—Fra Diavolo, stood at the lower end of the old French market, waiting for the coming of the mysterious personage who had engaged his services. This was to be the third interview between the two. On the second the customer had made known the name of the man about whom he was so anxious, and the brigand, who was cunning as a fox, had set about his task with great alacrity.

Of his own accord the stranger had selected the market as a meeting-place, remarking that his visits to the Italian quarter might provoke remark, and the brigand, from this circumstance, coupled with the general way in which the visitor conducted himself, got the impression that his customer was an old and wary bird, not likely to be easily caught.

Promptly—almost to the minute—the principal in this odd affair made his appearance.

As on the two previous occasions upon which the Italian had met him, he was muffled up, without appearing to be, so that recognition was impossible.

"Good-evening, sir," accosted the Italian, in his polite way, for this fellow was a courtly bravo, no common stabber. "You are prompt to time, and that is what I like; it is a pleasure to do business with a gentleman who does not keep a man waiting."

The stranger cast a rapid glance around as if fearing a spy might be lurking somewhere.

"Tranquillize yourself; no one is near," the Italian assured.

"One cannot be too careful in such a business as this; let us walk up and down as we converse."

"Yes, that is a good idea!"

And as they talked the two walked slowly through the center of the deserted market, and as they were careful to converse in low tones it was clearly impossible for any eavesdropper, lurking on the outside of the market—there were no side walls, the roof being supported by large pillars placed at regular intervals—to overhear any of the conversation without dodging from pillar to pillar and thus exposing themselves to the certainty of being detected.

"Now then, what have you discovered?" the stranger asked, beginning the conversation.

"Not much, my good sir, although I have worked like a horse, but what can a man do? You cannot make something out of nothing."

"True, but a very little information may do for me; go on."

"He calls himself Felix Houma, and for the present he is in the office of Loperleese and Son."

The stranger started slightly, which the keen-eyed brigand noticed.

"Aha! does that alarm you, my master?"

"Oh no; but what does he do there?"

"That is a mystery. After I had run my gentleman down I set all my spies at work to find out all about him, besides taking a hand in myself. I am a sort of king among the Italians here in New Orleans, as you probably know, my master, and in such a case as this—when the job is worth it, I call upon all my

subjects, and where information of this kind is wanted, the children render the most valuable services—the boot-blacks, fruit-sellers and flower-girls; no one suspects them, and they can ask questions without limit."

The stranger nodded; the idea seemed good.

"Many men have I played the spy upon in my time, sometimes on my own account, and sometimes for hire, but this man is the worst that I ever shadowed."

"How so?"

"Why, look you, my master, he is like an eel; when you think you have laid your finger upon him, behold! he is not there, and yet he is nothing—a slim bit of a creature that I could take and snap across my knee like a pipe-stem. He is costing you a deal of money; it grieves me to the soul to say it, but the information I have gained is not worth half—no, not a quarter of the money you have paid."

"It may be to me," responded the stranger, quietly; "let me hear it, and then I can judge."

"His name you already know."

"Yes, but is it his name, or is he sailing under false colors?"

"Oh, my master, I cannot tell you a thing about that. All I can assure you is that he is in Loperleese's office, and he has not been there long."

"Loperleese's clerk?"

"There's a mystery again; he sits at a desk and does some little work—work taken away from one and another clerk—which he could do as well as not. In fine, the fellow is no more use in the office than a fifth wheel to a coach, and none of the clerks understand why he comes there at all; he's no good!"

"He is placed there to watch somebody, perhaps."

"The rest have that suspicion, and they do not feel very amiable to Signor Houma."

"But, when he leaves the office, where does he go?"

"Up into the air!" responded the Italian, with a quizzical look.

"What do you mean?"

"Or down into the earth, if you think that way is better, or more likely for him to take."

"He evades you, eh?"

"Completely, no matter how skillful the spy I put upon his track. One of my boys, a boot-black, as cunning a rascal as ever grew up within the shadow of the gallows—a rat, able to outwit the keenest detective, was put upon this Houma's track. He traced him to the St. Charles Hotel, and then, almost before my rascal knew it, he vanished—zipp!" and the Italian threw his arms wide open, thus illustrating the abrupt disappearance of the Creole.

"A man might have had better luck."

"Oh, no, my master: I tried it myself; and, by all the saints! I swear to you a keener hound on the scent than I, does not exist. I was rigged up in good togs, too—no rags like these, but I was a 'blood,' a sport. Diavolo! if you had seen me swagger down St. Charles street, you would have sworn that I owned half of New Orleans, and, mind you, I had made up my mind that my gentleman should not give me the slip. But the moment I got upon his track he seemed to have a suspicion that he was watched; without letting him catch me, I dogged him like his shadow, from St. Charles to Canal, and then down to the levee, and he walked merely to throw me off the track; he knew he was shadowed, and yet he never laid his eyes upon me. He went on board one of the steamers lying at the levee, one of the Memphis packets, and I staid on the shore and watched for him. He never came off that boat. At five she backed out into the stream and went on her way. Of course after that there wasn't any need of my waiting, so I went up-town again. I dropped into the Phenix saloon to get a glass of brandy, and there stood my man. What is this Houma, my master, a devil?"

"But this second time, did you not track him?" cried the stranger, eagerly.

"My master, let me speak the truth to you; one might as well try to track a glass of water thrown into the current of the Mississippi as to attempt to follow that man," replied the brigand, earnestly. "I did follow him, and inside of ten minutes lost him in the crowd right on St. Charles street."

"If he is a devil as you think, I presume there wouldn't be any use of attempting to kill him," the stranger remarked, with a covert glance at his companion's face.

Fra Diavolo, the second, laughed; he was quick of comprehension, this brigand.

"Oh, as to that, captain, it can only be decided by a trial. He may be a devil in dodging, but human enough to wince at a knife-stab."

"I am curious; suppose you make the experiment?"

"It will cost money, my master."

"It should not cost much; this man is a stranger; no friends apparently to inquire after him. When such a person disappears who is there to make trouble? It is not like putting a knife into a man about whom the whole city will howl."

"Very true; the risk is not great; one stranger more or less in New Orleans won't matter; but then consider—this slippery gentleman is so

cunning that it may be a difficult job to get a chance at him, and he may prove an awkward customer to handle, too."

"Did you not say you could break him over your knee?"

"Yes, yes, perhaps."

"And I will arrange a trap so that you can entice him to any lonely spot you may suggest."

"Oh, if you can do that, the thing will be easy enough."

"How much for the service, then?"

"Five hundred dollars is the lowest copper, but since you have paid so promptly you needn't settle until the job is done."

"It is a bargain; here are your instructions," and he handed a sealed envelope to the brigand; "now the spot where the deed must be done?"

"There's an old cabin on the river road two miles from the city."

"That will do, and three nights hence do the job."

It was a dreadful compact.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LETTER.

THE spy in the office of Loperleese and Son, playing the rôle of a clerk, was a source of annoyance to everybody concerned. The clerks fancied he had been put there to watch some one of them, and each and every man had a suspicion that himself was suspected. Even old Simon got the idea into his head, from something he had observed in the young man's manner, that the spy was watching the firm of Loperleese and Son, more than anything else.

He communicated this suspicion to his son, and though both scoffed at the idea—for there was no more solid house in the country than their own—yet for all that it was extremely distasteful to them.

And the old man was right; Houma was more occupied in watching them than doing anything else, for he hungered to discover who had supplied the money for Mrs. Esperance to indulge in her extravagances. He believed that the old man did know, despite his avowal to the contrary, but, so far, he had not succeeded in discovering anything to confirm this belief.

One point, though, he had gained, and that was the recognition of De Bellville, whom he knew in Europe; the connecting of French Louis, or Larry, the bloke—to give him the names by which he was generally known in the slums of Paris and London—with the mysterious murder might be productive of definite results.

Houma, of course, was conscious of the suspicion with which he was regarded by all in the banker's office, and also realized the hopelessness of getting at old Loperleese's secret, supposing he had one. True, by pretending to be ignorant of French, he had succeeded in overhearing two or three conversations between the father and son in regard to Mrs. Esperance's affairs. The necessary legal steps had been taken to secure the money advanced by Judge Clairborne through Loperleese and Son, and in speaking of the matter heard them ascribe the willingness of the judge to advance the money to the fact that his son had become entangled with the siren, and he therefore desired to secure some hold upon her. This seemed to be reasonable enough, and the spy was baffled.

About this time the conclusion was reached that Monsieur Felix Houma was about "played out," and that some other disguise must be sought, when a letter arriving at the office addressed to "Felix Houma, Esquire," changed the current of ideas.

The spy was surprised when he found the letter lying upon the desk which had been assigned to him in the office, for as Felix Houma was a fictitious personage—one who had had no existence until conjured up by the hints of the secret agent—he was not likely to be troubled with correspondents.

The superscription was written in a small, neat hand, as if penned by a woman, but when examined closely it might be said that it was not a natural hand, but a disguised one.

The note read as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND:

"Will you forgive if I suggest you are barking up the wrong tree—on a false scent altogether, and if you stick to your present trail from now until doomsday you will never reach the point you seek. Now I was mixed up in the affair and know exactly what I am talking about. I can give you a 'pointer,' if you can make it worth my while. The fact is I have not been well treated by my pals in this matter and I am just hungry for a chance to get square on the whole gang, provided I am made all right and pretty well paid for my trouble. Of course I am not going to run myself into the State Prison or the hangman's noose if I know myself. I must be made safe, or else I shall be as dumb as a clam. If you can see your way clear to fix me all right, I am open to negotiate. Perhaps the best way to commence operations will be for you to meet me, when we can have a good square talk: I can show you exactly what I can do, and you will, I reckon, see that without me you don't stand any show 'or your money. Of course I rely upon your honor in this matter not to put up any job upon me; it won't do you any good to try it, anyway, for I shall be on my guard, and if you lay any trap for me, nary hide or hair will you see. But if you feel disposed to act square I will meet you to-

night at ten o'clock at an old cabin two miles above the city on the river road. You will know the house—it is on the right hand side of the road—by two lights put a foot apart in the window. You can't miss it if you keep your eyes peeled. I can tell you more about what you want to learn in two minutes than you can pick up nosing around New Orleans in ten years.

"It has just struck me while writing this here screed that maybe you may be a leetle bit skeered at this arrangement—think that it is a trap perhaps. I don't blame you if you do, because I might be taken in that way, for it is necessary you should come alone; but you are welcome to carry all the arms you like, and being on your guard you ought to be able to take care of yourself. I will be on hand, but if you are afraid to try it, why, just keep your mouth shut about this note, and oblige

"Yours truly."

It was a strange letter and gave the spy much food for thought.

Cunning and able as was "Felix Houma," the riddle puzzled him. His mission, then, was known, and yet he was sure he had not betrayed himself in any way.

The tables were turned; in place of his playing the spy, some one was playing the spy upon him!

"I was not deceived," he muttered. "I have been watched and followed, just as I suspected; I have been trying to think that I allowed myself to be too easily influenced by my imagination; but it is evident that both myself and game are known. Now, how was the information gained?"

Then came the remembrance that through the aid of the chief of police he had been introduced to the firm of Loperleese and Son.

"Two chances for a leak," was the murmured exclamation. "First the police office and then through this firm. The 'angel' is at the bottom of it. Ah, if I can only get on the track of the man who rode the black horse, with the white blaze in the forehead and the white hind feet, on that fatal night! But I will have him, before I get through. I will keep this appointment to-night, and will go prepared for danger. After to-night Monsieur Felix Houma will vanish. Before night comes, though, I will take a good look at the place appointed and see what it looks like."

After lunch Houma returned not to the office, nor did he ever darken the doors again, much to the relief of the firm of Loperleese and Son and their employees.

That afternoon, in perfect disguise, the spy made a careful survey of the old cabin, and so adroitly was the surveillance performed that if the writer of the note had been lurking in the neighborhood he would never have suspected the spy.

There was nothing suspicious about the cabin. It was simply an old, deserted rookery, windows and doors alike destroyed, nothing left but the four walls and the roof, and they were in a decidedly bad condition. It stood alone in a field where only tall weeds flourished, no covert near to conceal a foe, and only a few paces from the road.

"Perhaps this is an honest offer, after all," the spy mused, as he trudged back to the city. "But, whether it is so or not, I will be on my guard. The moon will be up full and strong, and I don't see how they can catch me."

But, who can gauge the ingenuity of man?

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DEATH-TRAP.

As the reader probably has surmised, the letter was a decoy designed to lead "Felix Houma" into a snare whereby his death might be accomplished without risk and without danger of detection.

The upper river road, after nightfall, was a lonely place, very little travel over it, and after ten hardly one person to the hour.

A better spot for a deed of darkness could not have been found within a dozen miles of the city.

The stranger had planned the scheme, and the grandson of Fra Diavolo was to carry it out.

No easy matter, though, to catch such a wily customer as the supposed Creole—on which point both of the plotters were agreed, but when the stranger unfolded his scheme the Italian had assured him that it could hardly fail.

Two chances only were there against success: the first was, Houma might suspect a trap and not come; second, that, suspecting a trap, he would come, but on his part would endeavor to trap the entrappers.

At this sort of game the keenest wits would win, and if the spy entered upon it, it would be wit against wit and life against life.

That Houma, if he suspected danger and had resolved to capture the writer of the mysterious communication, would come alone and try, single-handed, to accomplish the task, never entered the head of the Italian. Such a thing he himself would never have attempted, and he did not give his antagonist credit for being any braver than he; in fact, in his own opinion, no bolder man than then stood in his own shoes ever walked the earth.

The bravo reasoned that if Houma wished to snare the writer of the letter, his game would

be to place his allies in ambush near the old cabin; so, to be sure that this was not done without his knowledge, he came upon the ground at sunset, got up in a rough suit like a hunter and with a double-barreled shot-gun over his shoulder.

Such a disguise afforded him ample excuse for rambling, for a man in search of game would not be likely to stick to the road nor to pursue any regular course.

Carefully the bravo examined every foot of ground within an eighth of a mile from the cabin, but discovered no suspicious sign. No human foot, apparently, had trodden the ground for many a long day.

Satisfied that no trap had been set, as yet, the Italian selected an ambush in a little clump of bushes on the other side of the road from that on which the cabin was situated, almost three hundred yards below it and some fifty feet from the thoroughfare.

The bushes were on a little knoll, and when the Italian knelt behind the leafy screen, he was completely concealed from view, although commanding a full view of the road and cabin.

"There, here will I lie as snug as a bug in a rug," the bandit remarked, as he crouched behind the bushes. "Not even a rabbit can pass along the road, either to or from New Orleans, without my seeing it."

Then he went through some strange maneuvers.

As we have said, the clump of bushes grew on a little knoll. In the rear of the knoll was a small hollow, and when the Italian knelt in this hollow his shoulders were nearly on a level with the top of the knoll.

The double-barreled gun he carried was a breech-loader, and after he had surveyed "the vantage of the ground," he proceeded to change the charges in the gun; the shells which he inserted were loaded with buckshot.

Then, after the gun was so charged, he brought it to his shoulder and poked the barrels in among the bushes so as to completely command the road, and as the man was an expert marksman, it was a hundred to one that the buckshot would riddle the object fired at when he should pull trigger.

And this was the trap which the mysterious stranger had devised, and if the spy came to the meeting place and escaped falling into it, it would be almost a miracle.

The hours passed slowly away; a half dozen people journeyed along the road, but nothing suspicious occurred. The moon began to rise; when it got fairly up, so as to illuminate the surroundings, the Italian looked at his little silver watch to see that it was just nine o'clock.

"Time for the lights in the window," he murmured; then, with extreme caution, he made a wide circle, approached the old house from the rear, and placed two lighted candles in the window that looked toward New Orleans.

This task completed, with the same caution he returned to his ambush.

The night was so still, so little breeze stirring that the candles hardly flickered, but burnt as steadily as the signal lamps that light the mariner by night to the harbor of refuge.

From nine to ten not a soul passed along the road in either direction, but as the bells tolled ten from some of the distant clocks in the city, to the ears of the watcher came the sound of a horse's hoofs galloping along the road, and the beast came from the direction of the city.

"Is it he—is it my bird?" quoth the Italian, eagerly, as he cocked both barrels of the gun.

The moon now was up full and strong, and everything could be discerned almost as clearly as by day.

"Would he come on horseback?" mused the Italian. "Yes, yes, of course, if he comes alone and unsuspecting of danger. If he had others with him and had arranged a trap, some of them would be sure to pass along the road before him. If he is this horseman, he comes alone, and I shall have an easy job. Diavolo! Never before in my life did I make five hundred dollars so easily."

Afar down the road the horseman came in sight. That it was Houma the brigand felt certain, for the moment the horseman arrived at a point where he could command a view of the lights in the window, he slackened the pace of his steed, pulling the animal in to a halt.

"It is he—it is surely he!" the Italian exclaimed, making all needful preparations to take a shot at him as he passed. "If it was not—if it was a stranger, he would not take any notice of the lights; but it is my man, and he approaches at a walk, so as to be able to take a good look at the place. He is not easy in his mind; he fears treachery, and he does not intend to walk into a trap if he can help it. Aha! but with all his skill and cunning here is a trap that he will not detect, and the first suspicion he will have of danger will come to him when the report of the gun breaks the stillness of the night and he feels the buckshots tearing his flesh."

The horseman rode onward at a walk, evidently with his attention fixed upon the candles burning in the cabin window, and as he approached the ambush the Italian, with fierce joy, perceived that it was indeed the man for

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whom he waited—Felix Houma, the self-styled Creole.

"A dozen paces more and good-by to you, my friend!" the villain muttered between his teeth.

Houma, who was mounted on a common gray beast of indifferent merit, was keeping a wary look-out as he approached the place of meeting, but the clump of bushes, behind which the bandit lurked, was only favored with a passing glance. Ahead—in the neighborhood of the cabin the new-comer looked for danger and was bending all his efforts to detect if he was walking into any trap or peril.

"Crack!"

The sharp report of the gun rung out clear on the night air.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ITALIAN IS ASTONISHED.

WITH the most deliberate aim the assassin had fired. At such a distance for such a marksman to miss was almost impossible, and the Italian did not miss.

He had aimed directly at the heart of the horseman, and the rider received the whole charge in his side, right under his arm.

With a loud moan he threw up his hands and tumbled off the horse on the further side to the ground.

The horse, frightened by the discharge, galloped wildly up the road.

The Italian rose from his ambush and looked carefully around him, to discover if any one was in the neighborhood—any wayfarer, who might be alarmed by the shot, and who, naturally, would hasten to the scene.

But, so lonely was the spot, and so little traveled the road, that not a soul besides the victim and the assassin heard the sharp report.

"Everything is going well to-night," the bravo remarked, as soon as he had satisfied himself that there was no danger of interruption. Then he strode boldly from the bushes and advanced to the side of his victim, now groaning and gasping in the dust of the road.

"Now what had I better do w th him?" asked the brigand, communing with himself as he stood by the helpless man and looked down upon his victim with no more compunction than if the rider had been some animal who ought to be hurried into eternity with scant ceremony. "Leave him here? No, no; some chance passer might discover him and so raise a hue and cry before I am ready for it. I had better put him in the cabin, for there no one will be likely to discover him for some time."

Placing his gun under a cluster of vines by the roadside he then returned to the side of his victim, bent over him, and as he did so a wonderful transformation took place.

The fallen man sat bolt upright as though impelled by a spring and shoved a cocked revolver under the nose of the Italian.

Taken completely by surprise, the bravo recoiled in horror.

The horseman had him at a terrible disadvantage; he had laid aside his gun, and the only weapon he possessed was a knife concealed in his bosom, but of course it was quite clear that before he could draw his stiletto his intended victim could "drill him full of holes."

Stepping back a yard or so, the brigand could only stare open-mouthed at the other.

"Diavolo!" was all he could find breath to utter.

"How are you!" accosted Houma, for it was the so-called Creole. "It strikes me this isn't the first time I have seen you. You are the inquisitive genius who dogged my footsteps the other day until I gave you the slip down on the levee."

"I never saw you before," growled the bandit.

"Of course; I haven't the least doubt of it, and I am too much of a gentleman to question your word. You and I are perfect strangers, and that is the reason, I suppose, why you laid in wait for me to-night and introduced me to the contents of your shot-gun."

"It was a mistake!" the Italian declared, with sullen assurance.

"A mistake?"

"Yes, yes, diavolo! why should I wish to injure you?"

"Of course, certainly, your finger slipped, eh?"

"Well, I—" and the bandit halted; the lie was too transparent even for him to father.

"Your finger slipped just as you happened, for fun, to have your gun leveled directly at my heart."

"I didn't say so," growled the Italian.

"True, very true; perhaps I haven't got the matter exactly right. Your finger did not slip; on the contrary, you tried your best to kill me, but it was a mistake; in the darkness you took me for somebody else."

"That is it, but in the fiend's name how did it happen that you escaped?" exclaimed the brigand.

"Oh, I bear a charmed life, and a silver bullet is the only kind that can have any effect upon me. But now to business: I want to have

the pleasure of about ten minutes' conversation with you, upon some important matters, and as we are liable to be interrupted here by some passing traveler, if you will have the kindness to walk with me into the old cabin yonder I shall be much obliged."

"I will not! diavolo! what do you want to do with me?" Despite the quiet tone in which the other spoke the Italian scented danger, and like many another man of his nature was rather inclined to show the white feather when brought to bay.

"I only want to talk to you, that's all. If I wanted to kill you I could do that here as well as there. What are you afraid of, you fool? Come, I've no time to waste with you; keep your hands down by your side, just as they are now and march, or I will put a hole through you!"

Something in the speaker's eyes showed that no idle threat had been uttered, and so, utterly cowed by the situation, the bravo marched slowly into the house, the other following at his heels with the leveled revolver.

Once in the cabin the brigand faced about and confronted the victor.

"Now, then, it was you who wrote the decoy letter?"

"I cannot write English."

And this statement was true, fluently as he spoke the language.

"But you know who did write it?"

"I know nothing!" and the ruffian folded his arms across his breast and scowled doggedly at his questioner.

"You must answer me or I will kill you as sure as you are a living man!" cried Houma, with sudden, intense fierceness. "You have been hired to assassinate me; a letter was written as a decoy to bring me here. Quick! the name of your employer!"

The Italian turned pale and the great sweat-drops commenced to appear upon his forehead. Never before had he been nearer to death, in his judgment; his courage deserted him.

"Mercy—mercy!" he gasped; "in the name of all the saints I pray you not to fire."

"Speak, then!"

"I cannot—upon my life I cannot."

"You were hired to assassinate me?"

"Yes, yes, but have mercy upon me."

"Who hired you?"

"I do not know."

"Not know? Explain how that can be!"

And the Italian did explain; he related in full the particulars of his interview with the stranger and the other listened with marked attention, for he felt sure the man spoke the truth.

"When and where were you to meet him and relate how this scheme progressed?"

"To-night, between twelve and one, at the old French market."

"Swear to me that you will not go there, nor hold communication with this unknown, and I will spare you!"

"I swear it by the Virgin Mother!" cried the bandit, solemnly, with upraised hand.

"Go your way, then, in peace!"

The Italian skipped out of the cabin with the agility of a dancing-master, took to his heels and ran like mad. What did he care what befell his employer so long as he got off scot-free?

"I will keep that appointment to-night!" the spy cried.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MEETING.

HOUMA'S first movement, after the Italian had decamped so abruptly, was up the road in search of his horse.

The beast, being only a sorry hack hired from a livery-stable, he judged would not go far, although he had been frightened by the report of the gun.

Surely enough—five or six hundred yards up the road—he came upon the horse, who was feeding upon some tempting bit of grass.

The animal allowed himself to be caught, and once in the saddle Houma rode for the city.

He had expected to overtake the Italian but did not, for the brigand had disappeared as by magic.

"There's nothing of the English bull-dog in these Italians," Houma muttered, as he rode rapidly onward. "I'll have no more trouble with this Neapolitan scoundrel, and the chances are that I shall catch his employer on the hip to-night. And who is his employer? Who wishes me to be put out of the way? One man only in this world and he is the one who stuck the knife into the throat of the woman—the murderer!

In some mysterious way—through some leak which I cannot locate and cannot account for—he has discovered that I am on his track, that I am pressing him closely, and to prevent discovery—to cover up one crime he does not hesitate to commit another. To-night, though, I will have him unless Satan himself befriends him.

Reaching the city and returning the horse to the stable from which it had been procured the spy disguised himself in a suit of clothes which were not unlike those worn by the Italian; then, pulling the soft hat well down over his

eyes, Houma betook himself to the old French market, which he reached just a quarter of an hour after midnight.

The French market is a lonely place at twelve of the night and when the police spy arrived at the lower end there was not a soul in sight.

"I am first on the ground, then," he mused, as he carefully surveyed the surroundings; "but the chances are that I will not have to wait long; men are generally prompt when playing for high stakes."

And as the quick eyes of the secret agent roved anxiously about seeking to penetrate the semi-darkness which now veiled the surroundings, and which was only partially dispelled by the flickering light of the gas-lamps, a new idea flashed into his mind.

"Do I look enough like the Italian to deceive the man for whom I wait?" he queried. "My bird is no common one, but a master-mind, else I could not have been baffled as long as I have."

There was indeed a resemblance between the figures of the two, and in the gloom which prevailed, even one well acquainted with the Italian, and who came expecting to meet him there, might have been deceived.

But the secret agent was one who never left anything to chance if it could possibly be avoided, and so, for fear that the unknown might take it into his head to examine him from a distance, discover something to excite his apprehensions, and so keep away, the spy determined to withdraw into the deep shadow cast by one of the pillars. When this was accomplished, it would have been a sharp-eyed man indeed who could have told whether the form crouching in the shade was old or young, much less recognize the person.

The minutes passed slowly away, and the watcher, despite his bloodhound-like tenacity, began to get impatient.

Once in awhile a footfall would sound upon his ears, and hope would be excited; but it always turned out to be some belated citizen, generally rather unsteady on his legs, pursuing his uncertain way toward his home.

"Does he scent the snare, or has the Italian betrayed me and put him on his guard?" he exclaimed at last, after consulting his watch and finding that it only lacked a quarter to one.

"Fifteen minutes more, and then will it be of any use to wait, or shall I give it up and try to get upon his track in some other way?"

Hardly had the muttered words escaped from his lips when some one entered the market at the upper end, and came sauntering along down through it, as though enjoying a pleasant promenade.

"It is either a policeman, or else my game," the spy thought, as he leaned up against the pillar, as though half asleep.

The man came nearer and nearer, and soon the anxious eyes of Houma discerned that it was no vigilant guardian of the night, but a tall stranger, so muffled up that recognition was impossible, just as the Italian had described.

A thrill of fierce joy came over the secret agent—the prey had fallen into the trap!

As the man came on his quick eyes detected the skulking figure in the shade of the pillar, and believing that it was the Italian, he came straight up to him.

The thief-catcher had decided upon a bold course. He felt sure it would be useless to attempt to deceive the stranger by passing himself off as the Italian. He had drawn his revolver and cocked it the moment he heard footsteps at the upper end of the market, and being thus prepared, he intended to take the unknown at a disadvantage and strip him of his disguise.

He straightened up as the man approached, but was careful not to step out of the shade in which he stood, for fear of discovery.

But when the unknown came within ten feet of the pillar, he halted suddenly and thrust his hand into his pocket, as if to grasp a weapon. He had discovered that it was not the Italian who lurked there!

A bright idea came into the head of the spy—to attempt to pass himself off as an emissary of the brigand; if the plan succeeded he could, probably, be able to penetrate the disguise of the other without revealing his own.

"It is all a-right," he said, cautiously, assuming the broken dialect peculiar to an Italian. "Ze boss sent me."

"The boss?" remarked the stranger, with a furtive glance around him as if he feared that others were lurking near.

"Yes, ze grandson of Fra Diavolo."

"Well?" The stranger was non-committal, evidently suspicious.

"He could not a-come."

"No?"

"He is a-hurt, bad."

"How?"

"Who can a-tell? No me!" and the spy shrugged his shoulders. "He sent a-me to wait for you and to a-say zat everyting is all a-right."

"Everything is all right? and did he not say more? Did he speak about anybody else?"

"Oh, yes; I was to tell you your friend is a-dead."

"Dead?" and the unknown glared at the other with suspicious eyes.

"So he say, I don't know."

"And where is he—at his house?"

"Yes."

"And where is his house?"

The spy was caught; he had not the least idea of where the Italian lived, but it was no time to hesitate, so he answered promptly:

"I forget ze street and ze number; I can a-take you there; it is in ze Italian quarter—not far."

"I'll see him to-morrow," and the stranger turned away, evidently mistrustful.

The spy sprung after him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A DISCOVERY.

QUICK as thought the stranger turned, his revolver glistening in his hands. The spy had also drawn his weapon, and the two confronted each other with menacing gesture.

Both revolvers were cocked, both leveled.

"Surrender! you are my prisoner!" cried the secret agent, determined at any risk to unmask the stranger.

"Surrender? Your prisoner?" remarked the unknown, his eyes flashing like balls of fire, still—despite the gravity of the situation, and the suddenness of the surprise—disguising his voice so that it could not be recognized, although the spy was sure he had heard it before. "Why should I surrender? and who are you that demands it?"

"I am a detective officer."

"A detective? and what have you to do with me?"

"I want you for murder!"

"Murder? You are crazy!" answered the unknown, contemptuously.

"Not a bit of it, and you know it."

"Have you a warrant for my arrest?"

"Come, that's good! How the deuce could I have a warrant for you when I don't even know who you are?"

"What, arrest a man for murder of whose identity you are ignorant?" said the stranger, with a sneer.

"You are the party I want even if I don't know your name, and you know it, too! You know I have been on your track, and you feared I would run you down, and that is the reason why you hired the Italian to assassinate me to-night, but I knew a trick worth two of that. You are the man who wrote the decoy letter, for that rascal of a brigand couldn't do it, but in this case it is the old story of the engineer hoist by his own petard. You are my prisoner, so put up your weapon and surrender."

"Of what crime am I accused?"

"Murder! as I said before."

"Murder!" with a hollow, unnatural laugh.

"Yes, murder! and although you have covered your tracks in the most skillful manner, yet at last, thanks to a chapter of accidents, I have struck your trail, and, as it generally happens in all these cases, it is your own fault, too. If you had not employed the Italian to kill me I should not have been able to hunt you down."

"Murder?" and again the unknown laughed—the false, unnatural laugh that sounded so shrill and discordant; "and for whose murder, pray, am I wanted?"

"Of Adeline Esperance!"

Crack—crack!

Sharply on the calm air rang out two pistol-shots, the one following the other in such quick succession that the second seemed like an echo of the first.

The mysterious individual had but prolonged the interview to throw the human bloodhound off his guard, but, like a skillful swordsman, the detective watched the eyes of his adversary and thus was able to give shot for shot.

Standing breast to breast, not six feet of space between them, the pistols would seem certain to inflict mortal wounds upon both; but the breast of the spy was protected by a vest of steel chain which had saved him from the buckshot of the Italian and now was fated again to save the life of its wearer, although the revolver used by the unknown was such a capital weapon that its bullet pierced the breast-plate and inflicted quite a severe wound. The officer staggered back, for the moment feeling that his career on earth was ended.

And the unknown escaped without a scratch! The bullet from the spy's revolver struck him full in the breast an inch above the heart, but the missile having to pass through a heavy outside coat, a padded inside one, then encountered a large wallet full of folded papers, altogether about an inch thick, which was in an inside pocket, and this was an obstacle through which the ball could not penetrate.

The shock staggered him for a moment, but he speedily recovered, and turning, fled in haste, thinking that he had inflicted a mortal wound upon his antagonist.

But, as said—the secret agent was not wounded seriously enough to be disabled, and, nerved to renewed efforts by the flight of his foe, he followed in pursuit.

The sounds of their hasty footsteps rung

through the old market, and the unknown, finding that he was pursued, fled at the top of his speed. His disguise had not been penetrated; he had mortally wounded—so he supposed—the detective who had so persistently tracked him, and now if he could make good his escape all would be well.

At the end of the market he dashed out into the darkness and ran across the street toward the river.

In order to procure assistance and possibly rouse some sleepy policeman into heading the fugitive off, the spy discharged his revolver in the direction of the fleeing man, and so enraged was the detective that he tried to wing the flying man, but luck was on the side of the fugitive, for not a single bullet touched him.

As soon as the secret agent got out of the market he comprehended his enemy's plan of escape.

In a dark corner stood a horse, toward which the fugitive ran, and reaching the animal he threw himself upon its back and set off at full speed.

The escape of the unknown seemed more than possible now. There was but one way to prevent it. A single charge remained in the revolver. If he could succeed in disabling the horse with that last bullet the rider might be captured. Taking deliberate aim the secret agent's finger sped the last bullet on its mission.

The aim was true, for the stricken animal reared on its hind legs, beat the air with his fore ones and then sunk down, quivering in the agonies of death.

But the rider was not to be captured that night. As the animal fell he threw himself from the saddle and was away at his best speed almost before the spy was conscious that his bullet had struck home. So again the pursuit began.

The chase led him by the body of the horse, and to his astonishment he discovered that the dead steed was the very animal of which he had so long been in search! It was the black horse with the white blaze in the forehead and the white hind feet which had been ridden along the river road near the mansion of Mrs. Esperance on the night of the murder by the stranger, whom he had so signally failed in tracing!

"I am on the right track now; this is the murderer!" the spy muttered, between the little white teeth as every energy was bent upon overtaking the fleeing man.

But fortune was against the sleuth-hound of justice this night.

The wound in the breast was bleeding freely, and the exertions of the chase soon began to tell even on this frame of steel. The breath came thick and hard; the limbs began to become unsteady and a mist to obscure the eyes.

A groan came from the lips.

"Oh, mon Dieu! I must give it up!"

The spy halted and the fugitive made good his escape, vailed by the friendly darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MISSING HORSE.

THE pistol-shots excited attention. Even at such an hour some few people were in the street besides the "guardians of the night."

And all within hearing ran toward the spot from whence came the sound of the firing, but arrived upon the scene to discover only the body of the slain steed—pursued and pursuer had disappeared in the darkness.

Among those attracted to the scene was a reporter for one of the morning papers, who, after a brief inspection of the dead beast and an interchange of opinions with the bystanders, started for the office of the journal with which he was connected; and so the morning paper, with glaring head-lines to call the attention of the reader to

"A DARK MYSTERY ON THE LEVEE," gave a full account of the affair.

Now, by an odd chance, all the inmates of Judge Clairborne's mansion came down to breakfast at the same hour that morning.

Raymond, Mrs. Calhoun and Philippa were seated in the drawing-room waiting for the summons to the meal when the bell sounded, and just then the judge, who was unusually late, entered the room.

"We shall have quite a family party this morning," he remarked, as he conducted Mrs. Calhoun into the breakfast-room.

One of the morning journals was lying, folded, upon the judge's plate, and as Mrs. Calhoun passed, her quick eyes, ever on the alert, noticed the bold head-line.

"A Dark Mystery on the Levee!" she exclaimed. "Why, that sounds for all the world like the title to a romance. Read it, judge, please, and let us know what it is all about."

"Certainly, though I warn you in advance that these newspaper men are noted for making mountains out of mole-hills."

Then, after the party were seated and the breakfast served, Clairborne read the article aloud.

Unsatisfactory enough it was, too, for all the reporter could say—stripped of his romance

and adjectives—was, that at a little after one o'clock that morning, in the neighborhood of the French Market, attracted by the sound of pistol-shots, the writer hastened to the spot from whence the sounds had come: a fine horse was found, stretched dead in the street. An examination showed that the beast had been shot. The report dilated upon the fact that no trace could be found of the person or persons who had shot the animal, and wound up with a description of the beast, jet-black in color with a white blaze in the forehead and two white hind legs.

"Why, it is the exact description of my horse, Pepper!" Miss Lauderdale exclaimed. "How strange!"

The attention of all was directed to the young lady by this speech, and so no one noticed Mrs. Calhoun, who was so startled by this discovery that the cup of coffee which she was just putting to her lips almost fell from her hand, and Mrs. General Calhoun was not a woman to be easily startled, either.

"The description does fit your horse, Philippa," the judge observed.

"Yes, exactly," Raymond supplemented.

"But it cannot be my Pepper, of course."

"Not very well," replied Clairborne, with a smile at the idea.

"It might be, though!" exclaimed the girl, abruptly, evidently worried.

"Oh, nonsense, Philippa; how could that be possible?" the judge asked.

"Certainly not; the idea is ridiculous," Raymond added.

"Clearly it cannot be possible that this poor beast could be your horse, Miss Lauderdale," was Mrs. Calhoun's volunteered opinion.

There was a peculiar gleam in the dark eyes of the girl as the voice of the lady reached her ears, and the speaker, who, like a beast of prey was ever on the watch, murmured to herself:

"How that girl does hate me, and yet she has no reason to; is it that instinct warns her?"

"It might be possible, although of course I presume it is improbable," the girl replied, coldly.

"How possible, Philippa?" asked the judge, kindly, perceiving that the young lady was annoyed by the general disapproval which her remark had called forth.

"Might not some one have come and stolen my horse in the night?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, I did not think of that; such a thing is barely possible," the judge admitted.

"Such a thing might be done, but the rascal would be reckless indeed to try it, for the chances are at least ten to one that the attempt would be detected and the rogue captured before he could get the horse out of the place," the son declared. "I'll wager you what you like, Philippa, that Pepper is at this moment munching his oats in the stable in perfect contentment, and is as far from being a dead horse as you are from being a dead woman!"

"And I will wager all the rest of the years of my life," muttered Mrs. Calhoun, between her teeth, "that none of you will ever see that horse alive again. Oh, what a cunning trick of the jade to avert suspicion! She is playing a bold game but she will trip at last; they all do, no matter how boldly they play, for fate itself with undeviating laws fights against them."

The judge and his son being busy with Miss Lauderdale never noticed the expression which in spite of herself had crept over Mrs. Calhoun's face, but the girl saw it and a gleam of hostile fire came into her eyes.

"Oh, I do not positively say that my suspicion is correct; it is only a surmise, that is all," the girl replied.

"The best way to settle the question will be to have the horse brought out. Jeff," and he turned to the colored boy who waited upon the table, "tell the hostler to lead Miss Lauderdale's horse past the window." The breakfast-room commanded a view of the drive.

The boy departed and the judge with his peasant smile said:

"Now we will be able to decide very soon who is right and who is wrong. You, Raymond, think that the horse is there, and you, Philippa, doubt it, and, Mrs. Calhoun, by the by, how do you stand in this matter? You side with your sex, I presume?"

"Oh, yes; as I said it is not possible that Miss Lauderdale's horse was abroad last night. But, judge, how do you stand? I have not heard you define your position yet," said the lady.

"Neutral—strictly neutral," answered Clairborne, laughing. "I have too great respect for Raymond's judgment to differ from him without good cause, and too great an admiration for Miss Philippa to risk incurring her displeasure by presuming to doubt the correctness of her impressions."

There was a general laugh at this diplomatic announcement, and hardly was it over when the yellow boy reentered, a scared look upon his face, and before he opened his mouth every one in the room realized that he brought bad tidings.

"Aha, something is the matter with the horse!" Clairborne exclaimed.

"Deed, sah, dar ain't no horse dar!" blurted out the darky.

"No horse?" cried the judge.

"No, sah, no Pepper, an' de stable-folks thought dat young missy had him out a-riding, 'ca'se she done go riding sometimes early in de mawning afore breakfast."

"You have not had him out this morning, Philippa?" the judge asked.

"No, sir."

"It would be one of the oddest things in the world if the horse was stolen during the night, and came to his death in the manner described in the newspaper."

"Oh, my poor little horse!" cried the girl, bursting into a sudden flood of tears, and then retreating from the room in great confusion.

"We will go down-town after we finish breakfast, Raymond, and see if it is the horse," the judge remarked.

"Very well, sir, but if it is as I fear, would it not be a good idea to keep the fact to ourselves? If the newspaper-fellows get hold of it, we shall be overrun by reporters."

"Yes, the idea is a good one; nothing can be gained by publicity."

Mrs. Calhoun said nothing, but she thought all the more.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MORE EVIDENCE.

THE meal was finished almost in silence; the untoward circumstance of the missing horse had cast a chill on all. After breakfast, the judge and Raymond departed, and Mrs. Calhoun, inquiring for Miss Lauderdale, was informed that she had retired to her own apartment.

"The coast is clear, then," she murmured, "and I must see if I cannot pick up a little information of some one around the stables."

Putting on her hat, and taking the morning journal in her hand, she sauntered out into the garden as if with the intent of reading the news in one of the summer-houses.

As she walked toward the stable she caught the sound of angry voices. Two of the negroes were engaged in a fierce dispute. One was the old colored man who had charge of the stable, Uncle Pete, and the other was the negro, Pompey, Miss Lauderdale's groom.

The old man was giving the boy—as he termed him, although he was a strapping fellow of five-and-twenty—a piece of his mind, to which the other retorted in kind, and from their conversation the listener gained some important information.

The altercation was ended at last. Uncle Pete having got as good as he sent, and not being physically able to thrash the "cub," as he termed him, within an inch of his life, was fain to beat a retreat, and Mrs. Calhoun hastened to improve the opportunity to have a few words with the groom, who was in great disgrace just at that time.

The man welcomed the lady with a bow and a grin as she advanced, for this diplomat in petticoats had taken especial pains ever since she had taken up her quarters in the Clairborne mansion to get on good terms with the servants.

She had contrived to have little services performed by all of them, and, in recompense, had tossed out her money as freely as though she was made of gold. Where another woman would have given dimes she gave dollars, and so every servant in the house was glad to oblige "dat beau'ful lady" in any possible way.

There was a shady bench under the palmetto hedge, and Mrs. Calhoun, seating herself upon it, began to question the "boy."

"What is the matter, Pompey? Is old Uncle Pete abusing you?"

"Deed he is, missy gen'ral, an' 'tain't no more my fault dan nothin' at all," the negro responded, with a doleful face.

"The horse was stolen, then?"

"I s'pose so, ma'am," and the groom scratched his head in a doubtful way. "It's done gone, anyway. Dar ain't no mistake 'bout dat. Ole Pete says I didn't lock de stable las' night, but 'deed I did, for sure, 'kase when I come dis mawning an' fin' de door unlocked an' de hoss out, why shouldn't I t'ink dat Missy Philippa has done gone out riding? She's done dat way afore, an' how was I to know dat she didn't had de hoss? Dat ole turkey-buzzard of a Pete wouldn't have known any better for all dat he's bin round hyer shooting off his mouth so loose."

"It seems to me that it was a natural mistake on your part; but was there anything else stolen besides the horse?"

"Jest a saddle and bridle, ma'am, dat's all, and dat's a curious t'ing, too; it must have bin done in de darkness, for de tief done took de old saddle and bridle dat nobody would give five dollars for, when dar was a new saddle and bridle and Missy Philippa's new side-saddle dat she paid sixty dollars fur only a week ago, right in de stable!"

"That was strange."

"And dey lay de blame ob de t'ing all on me, too, you know, jest as if I cou'd have helped it; but you see, missy gen'ral, I was done gwine to leave, anyhow."

"Why, I didn't know that!" And the wily

woman looked grieved, as though she took a personal interest in the matter.

"Yes, ma'am, an' it's all along of dat yaller gal, Dinah."

"You astonish me."

"Yes, ma'am; she an' I used to be keeping company, you see, but she put on sich airs dat I couldn't stand it; dar ain't a nigger in de world dat could stand de frills dat yaller wench puts on. You see, ma'am, young missy makes a heap ob her, an' dat sp'iles de chile, an' dere's a gal up de street in Kurnel Babcock's house dat is a right nice gal, an' jest 'ca'se I tuck dis hyer gal to a party one night, Dinah she jest got her back up, an' she's bin doing her best to set de young missy ag'in' me eber since, and it's nuffin' but 'Pomp, why don't you do dis?' and 'Pomp, why don't you do dat?' all de time, and Kurnel Babcock's Rose—dat's de gal I done tolle you 'bout—well, she's got a place for me at de kurnel's, an' I gib warnin' dat I was twine to leabe at de end ob de month."

"I am sorry to hear that. But then, perhaps you will be better off. Miss Lauderdale is apt to be unreasonable sometimes, for she is something of a spoiled child and very odd and eccentric in her ways. For instance, the idea of a young girl like her dressing herself up in male attire and going out riding at all hours of the night."

The negro was completely deceived by the artful woman, and although amazed at her knowledge hadn't any idea that she was only guessing at the truth.

"Deed, ma'am, I didn't t'ink dat anybody but Dinah and me knew dat."

The lady smiled—that charming smile which had bewildered stronger intellects by far than the one with which she was now dealing.

"Ah, Miss Philippa has very few secrets that I do not know. I often would have remonstrated with her in regard to these wild freaks had I not known that words were useless."

"Course, ma'am, I couldn't say anything, you know, though I did used for to tell Dinah dat if massa judge found it out dat dere would be a row on dis'ere plantation, but she tolle me to hush up an' mind my own bus'niss; dat I would nebbet git poor if I did dat."

"And she looked so like a man, too, when she was dressed up in that black suit!"

"Deed she did!" the negro chuckled. "De fust time I see'd her I t'ought dat it was a man, for sure."

"And then the danger she ran, for she was always a bold and reckless rider, and for my part I never could understand what pleasure she took in riding in the dark."

"No more did I, ma'am, but I reckon dat she was up to something," and then, after glancing around him mysteriously as if he wished to be certain that no one could overhear what he was about to say, he came close up to Mrs. Calhoun, and bending down said, in a low and cautious tone: "'Deed, ma'am, I wouldn't like fur anybody to know dat I sed it, but I t'ink she was watching Massa Raymond, 'kase I noticed dat ebbery time dat she dressed herself up in dem strange clothes an' went out on de horse, dat very same night Massa Raymond had his horse out, too."

"Well, that was strange!"

"Dat's what I t'ink."

"How did she appear when she returned from these strange excursions? Was she nervous and agitated as if she had made some unpleasant discoveries?"

This was a "leading question," and almost breathlessly La Marmoset waited for the answer.

"Well, missis gen'ral, I can't say dat I ebber noticed dat she look out ob de way, 'cept one night, 'bout a month ago, I guess; I reckon, come to think on it, dat was de last time she went out rigged up like a man."

The female spy clinched her hands so tightly that the nails almost tore the skin.

"About a month ago—and was young massa out that night, also?"

"Yes, ma'am; he done got in 'bout one, and missy was 'bout half an hour arter him, an' she was as pale as a ghost an' cross as a b'ar. When I took de bridle dar war drops of blood on de reins, an' she sed she cut her hand ag'in' a tree in de darkness, an' when I told Dinah next day, she sed dat young missy acted drefful queer, and dat she had cut her glove in de hedge and it looked for all de world as if some one had bitten her hand right through de glove, for dere were little marks on her left hand, but dat was where she ran inter de hedge, a-course."

"And what became of the rein and the glove?"

"De bridle is in de stable, an' do w'at I kin I can't get de stain off, and I reckon Dinah's got de glove."

La Marmoset had heard all she wanted, and gracefully she withdrew.

More evidence and yet deeper and deeper drew the mystery.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ACCIDENT SPRINGS THE TRAY.

AFTER the little episode of the lancet the unknown charmer came no more to the shop of Monsieur Jacote.

Anxiously day by day the aged beau watched for the beautiful demoiselle, but she came not, and then so deeply impressed was the Frenchman with the fair enslaver that he procured a boy to attend to the shop and wasted much valuable time in frequenting the fashionable promenades of the city, hoping thus to catch sight of her. And so it happened, one day on Canal street, Jacote met an old friend, an aged French Creole who, being a man of wealth and able to indulge in hobbies, had a mania for collecting all sorts of strange curiosities.

The old fellow was rather a bore with his wonderful stories of the struggles and difficulties he had had in securing some of his treasures, and on this occasion being rather annoyed at his ill success in finding the mysterious beauty Jacote would have avoided the old gentleman, but the moment the other saw him he rushed toward the shopkeeper with outstretched hand.

"My dear Henri, I am delighted to see you! You are the very man I want! Is your time your own for a half an hour?"

"Well, I—" Jacote hesitated to lie outright and say that he was engaged, and the other immediately took advantage of the indecision.

"Good! You have half an hour! From the bottom of my heart do I rejoice! Come with me; I have just heard of a rare article to add to my collection, and I want you to see it. It is in your line; you are a judge; above all men in this world do I value you when an opinion is wanted in such a case," and linking his arm in that of his victim carried him off in triumph, talking away all the time with wonderful energy.

Jacote suffered himself to be carried along like a straw on the current of a stream, and soon into the office of the chief of police the old gentleman conducted Jacote, and then he explained to him the idea which had taken possession of his mind.

"You remember that horrible murder case about a month ago?"

"No, I cannot say that I do," replied Jacote, indifferently.

"Surely you must have heard of it—the lady who was murdered on her plantation a little way below the city! Peste! I thought everybody had heard of it. She was killed by a lancet stab in the neck."

Now Jacote did remember that he had heard some such case spoken of; his unknown enslaver had mentioned something about some such murder, and religiously the old man had treasured up every word which had fallen from her lips.

"I knew you must have heard of it," responded the other, in triumph. "Now, then, my idea is just this: I am going to get the lancet with which the crime was committed and add it to my collection! It will really be unique, eh?"

Jacote nodded assent, not that he thought so, for he didn't trouble his head to think about the matter at all. It was a harmless piece of insanity, it pleased the old gentleman, and that was all there was to it; the shopkeeper took no interest in it.

The chief of police, who happened to be well acquainted with the old fellow and knew of his mania, laughed when the request was made, and took the trouble to explain that it was a clear impossibility for him to even think of such a thing; the lancet must be preserved to be used as evidence when the murderer was caught.

The Creole was very much disappointed.

"At any rate I presume you can favor us with a look at the weapon, and after the murderer is tried and convicted, perhaps I may be able to gain possession of it."

The chief put his tongue in his cheek and then winked in a very significant way.

"Oh, yes, after the murderer is tried and convicted I have no doubt that a liberal sum will fetch the lancet, but before the murderer can be tried we have got to discover who he is and catch him, and, from present appearances, it would be quite safe to bet about a thousand dollars to one that we won't be able to do either the one or the other; but you can have a look at it all the same."

Then the chief went to the safe, which stood in a corner of the room, and, unlocking it, took out the lancet and laid it on the desk.

The Creole examined it with the utmost attention; a devotee handling the relics of a saint could not have exhibited more admiration; but Jacote never took the trouble to look at it until the other forced it upon his attention; then, the moment his eyes fell upon it, he started in genuine surprise.

"Oh, mon Dieu!" he cried, snatching up the little knife and examining it carefully.

Both the Creole and the chief looked amazed at the excitement betrayed by the other, but the Creole, knowing his friend's trade, thought it arose from professional motives, and took it upon himself to enlighten the chief.

"Monsieur Jacote, here, is a judge of such things; he deals in knives."

A light flashed in upon the brain of the chief.

"Aha!" he cried, "I reckon you are the man I have been looking for. You know that lancet?"

"Mon Dieu! yes!"

"You recognize it, sure?"

"Yes, yes; I could pick it out from amid a thousand."

"And you sold it?"

"I did!"
The chief could not restrain his nervous excitement.

"Do you know the party to whom you sold it, man or woman?"

"Oh, yes; it was to a gentleman—he trades with me constantly—his name is—"

"Hold on!" shouted the official, in stentorian tones; "don't rip his name out loud! Come here and whisper it in my ear."

Jacote obeyed the command, while the Creole stared, open-mouthed, astonished, at this unexpected turn of affairs.

The amazement of the chief, when he learned the name, was great.

"Sure that you haven't made any mistake about this business?" he inquired, evidently very much perplexed.

But Jacote protested that he was positive both in regard to the identity of the lancet and of the man who had purchased it from him; and then also related to the chief how he had recently seen the lancet in the hands of a lady.

"Oh, yes; one of my female detectives," observed the official, in an off-hand manner, just as if he knew all about it, when, in reality, he was totally ignorant. He had lent the lancet to the French detective, who had been introduced to him by the Englishman—the Frenchman explaining that he had a scheme by means of which he thought he could discover the owner, but, after keeping it a day or two, he had returned it with the remark that he had not been as successful as he anticipated.

"And the durned galoot! he was on the right track, every time!" he muttered to himself in disgust, after Jacote's disclosure of the unknown beauty episode. "What did he want to try and fool me for?" the official continued, enraged because the full particulars of the important find had not been revealed to him immediately. "Mebbe that French duck thinks he kin run this hyer thing without me, but I will soon show him that I know a trick worth two of that and can play it, too, for all it is wcrth! The cuss was going to skin me in this leetle affair—going to scoop up all the credit of the discovery for himself; but now you kin bet your life I'll scoop him so bad that he won't know what town he lives in!"

Enjoining strict secrecy upon both visitors but upon Jacote in particular, the chief dismissed them. Unhappy Jacote withdrew with a heavy heart. The beautiful unknown—the fascinating charmer who had enslaved him, was nothing but a police spy; and of all things in this world there is nothing your true Parisian hates worse than the secret agents of the law, who seek confidences only to betray them.

The chief, now that he had gained this valuable information, was quick to act. He called up his satellites, laid the matter before the proper authorities, had the necessary legal documents prepared, then started forth in person to make the important arrest.

When the afternoon newspapers made their appearance that evening all New Orleans rubbed its eyes and took a second look at the important announcement displayed in staring great type in their columns:

"Raymond Clairborne, son of Judge Clairborne, has been arrested as the murderer of Adeline Esperance!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE EXAMINATION.

THE city was as much astonished as though a thunderbolt had descended on a clear summer's day and at one fell swoop ruined half the town.

All of the best people, including the judge himself, laughed at the accusation, while the middle and the lower classes were rather inclined to believe that there might be some truth in the heinous charge.

"One of those ridiculous blunders that the police are always making," Clairborne declared. "There has been a great clamor in the newspapers, and some severe strictures leveled at the police because they have not succeeded in apprehending the murderer, and so, urged to do something, they have accused my boy, and the chances are that the only proof against him is the fact of his having been a guest at the house on the night of the murder, but he was only one among twenty other gentlemen, and why he was selected to bear the onus of this terrible accusation is a mystery."

La Marmoset was beside herself with rage when she heard the news.

"The blundering fools! They will ruin all!" she cried; then straightway she assumed her masculine disguise, and as the French detective called upon the chief of police, who received his visitor with ill-concealed exultation.

"Trying to play a fine game on me, wasn't you?" cried the burly official. "The lancet business didn't amount to much—no clew, and all the time you knew exactly who sold the little blade, and who bought it, for the dashing and lovely female who worked the trick played her cards right up to the handle, but I was

a-working at the case, too, and I reckon I've scored a p'int!"

"You have been too hasty; there is great doubt in my mind in regard to the guilt of this young man, and now that you have sprung the trap the real criminal may get away."

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that," and the chief winked, significantly. "Of course you don't like to be beat so clean—cleanest beat I ever heard of, but that is the way we do things in this country, you know; don't let folks from across the water get much ahead of us, if we don't toot our horn very loud!"

It was useless to talk to such an arrogant boaster, not wise enough to know the extent of his own ignorance, and so the disguised spy shrugged her shoulders and prepared to withdraw.

"Hold on! don't you want to come into this game?" asked the official, thinking it possible the Frenchman might have picked up some information that would be valuable. "I ain't a hog, you know; I'd jest as soon you would come in as not if you know anything worth telling."

"Oh, no: you are such a skillful player you had better play the game yourself and in your own way."

"Well, I kin do it and win every time!" cried the chief, blusteringly, but wincing at the sarcasm all the same.

"The tramp!" cried La Marmoset, as she descended to the street; "he must speak! I have played with him too long; he must speak!"

The examination of young Clairborne took place before an audience that filled the court-room to overflowing; in fact, a great many more curious people came than could possibly be crowded into the room.

The counsel for the accused had demanded an immediate examination. The judge had employed four of the most eminent lawyers in the city, and they were unanimous in denouncing the arrest as outrageous—a blundering piece of stupidity on the part of the police; but, even these able practitioners looked grave when the evidence against the prisoner was developed.

One witness elicited others, as when a stone is cast into a still pool, the first small circle soon gives rise to many others.

When it became known that Raymond Clairborne had been accused of the murder of Mrs. Esperance, half a dozen persons were ready to testify to trifles, whi. h, "light as air" before now, seemed "confirmation strong as proofs of Holy Writ."

The district attorney, too, had not been idle. Now that he had something to work upon, he showed abilities of no mean order, and his legal commands to appear and testify in the case of the "State of Louisiana against Raymond Clairborne," flew far and wide; an exceedingly strong case against the young man, too, the State made out.

This was only the preliminary proceedings, of course—the skirmish before the battle.

The evidence against the prisoner, briefly stated, was as follows—the district attorney introducing the witnesses in such order that each one's testimony unfolded more and more of the connected proofs.

The first evidence was in regard to the death of Mrs. Esperance and the manner by which it had been accomplished, ending with the coroner's verdict—"Murdered by a party or parties unknown."

Then came a colored stable-boy who testified to taking "Massa Clairborne's" horse when he arrived at Mrs. Esperance's mansion on the night of the murder, which arrival took place about nine o'clock, and the boy also testified that in obedience to "Massa Clairborne's" orders, he had brought out the horse and the gentleman had ridden away at exactly half-past eleven; the boy was positive in regard to the exact time, for, after the gentleman had mounted his steed, he had given him a quarter for his trouble, and the boy, being tired and sleepy, and anxious for the party to break up so that he could go to bed, asked the gentleman to be kind enough to tell him the time, and "Massa Clairborne," looking at his watch, had said it was exactly half-past eleven.

Now, this didn't amount to anything, and Clairborne's lawyer's would have wondered at its introduction, for it seemed to be more in favor of the prisoner than against him, if they had not guessed that the district attorney was building right from the foundation.

The next witness was an important one, being the negro, Julius, Judge Clairborne's own man; in mousing around to discover at what time young Clairborne had arrived at his home in the city on the night in question, the prosecution ascertained that old Julius kept watch at the front door that evening.

This aged servitor stated that he had been directed by "Massa Judge," on the night in question, to watch for "young massa," and when he came in to inform him that the judge desired to see him in the library, and then, in answer to a direct question, he said that Massa Raymond arrived at the house just about one o'clock; the witness was not certain to the minute, but he thought it was rather after one than before, thus clearly proving that the prisoner

had consumed an hour and a half in coming five miles.

The next witness was the judge's hostler, who testified that the horse which "young massa" had ridden that evening, was the best one in the Clairborne stable, and could easily cover fifteen miles an hour when "loping," and could walk five, being an exceedingly fast walker.

Colonel Terrebonne was next called upon. He was questioned regarding young Clairborne's presence at the Esperance mansion on that night, but the especial link in the testimony which he was expected to, and did, furnish, was in regard to the time required to cover the distance from Judge Clairborne's house to Mrs. Esperance's plantation.

The colonel lived in the same street as Clairborne, only a block away, and he stated that when riding at an easy gallop he had never taken more than half an hour to make the journey, and on one occasion, when in a hurry to get home, he had made the distance in twenty minutes.

The prosecution's idea was to show that, although the young man had quitted the house at half-past eleven, there was plenty of time for him to have returned and committed the murder, which occurred at twelve, and yet have reached his home at one.

That Clairborne should have occupied an hour and a half in a journey which should not have taken him over half an hour was very strange, unless he could account for the time in some reasonable manner, which, by the way, when examined, he did not do, saying that he took a roundabout way, was in no hurry to get home, being occupied in thought, and took no heed of time.

The prosecution having thus proved that there was ample time for the prisoner to have committed the deed, now proceeded to develop the motive.

Two of the servants employed in the house, the colored maids of the murdered woman, testified that they had overheard quite an angry conversation between Mrs. Esperance and the prisoner on the eve of his departure, caused by the fact that the prisoner had witnessed a love passage between Mrs. Esperance and "Kurnel Lance" in the summer-house; he had told Mrs. Esperance that a woman who was so free of her lips was unworthy the love of any honest man and she was welcome to go to Terrebonne if she liked, but she had ruined his life, and the day would come when she would be sorry for it; Mrs. Esperance had answered defiantly, and the pair had parted in anger.

During certain portions of this testimony every eye in the court-room had been directed at Colonel Terrebonne, who grew as red as fire and wished himself a thousand miles away, for this revelation of his little love episode with the dashing Mrs. Esperance was particularly distasteful to him.

Here was the motive. The prisoner had quarreled with the woman, parted with her in anger, telling her that she would be sorry for what she had done—a most decided threat, of course.

It really began to look as if the prosecution had a case, and the last witness summoned, Judge Clairborne himself, gave stronger evidence against his son than any of the rest.

The judge, in answer to the district attorney's questions, admitted that he had had an interview with his son in the library at the time sworn to; admitted that the young man had told him he had just come from Mrs. Esperance's plantation; then the prosecution put a question, to which the prisoner's lawyers objected, but the objection was overruled, and the witness was directed to answer:

"Did your son appear at his usual ease, or did he display signs of agitation?" was the question.

"I did not notice anything out of the way in his manner," was the judge's placid answer.

Then the prosecution went on what is technically called a "fishing excursion"—that is, put a question, designed primarily for effect, but which might produce some results.

"Was the prisoner's clothing at all disordered—did you notice any spot of blood upon his person?"

The judge hesitated; a troubled look came into his eyes; his face became white; he appeared to breathe with difficulty, and he slowly turned his gaze upon his son, who, calm, but pale, seemed the least unmoved of any in the room.

There was a breathless silence; all within the court seemed to hang upon Clairborne's answer.

But the prisoner spoke first.

"Do not fear to speak, father! I am innocent, and the truth cannot harm an innocent man."

The prisoner's lawyers were on their feet in an instant, and vehemently protested against such a question, but again they were overruled and the presiding judge directed Clairborne to answer.

"I did notice a small spot of blood upon the shirt-cuff of my son, coming from a bleeding gum—"

"Stop—stop! We don't want that!" yelled

the District Attorney; "no explanation is required."

And then the lawyers had another wrangle, but Clairborne had got the explanation out in spite of them.

Little use was it, though; "probable cause" had been proved, and Raymond Clairborne was committed to jail, charged with the murder, and so complete seemed the evidence that there were a hundred in the city who believed him guilty to one who thought otherwise.

CHAPTER XL.

THE TRAMP IN A TRAP.

AFTER the old tramp's woeful disappointment in regard to selling the diamond, he had relapsed into a sort of state of coma. Utterly dispirited and downcast, he really did not seem to care whether he lived or died. In fact, had it not been for the Italian boy, who provided him with shelter and food, the old fellow most certainly would have suffered!

The boy was away the greater part of the time, too, and in the month that passed since they first became acquainted, Johnny Roach did not see the young Italian more than half a dozen times.

It was the night of the day when the examination of young Clairborne had taken place, and the boy and the tramp, sitting together in their garret, dispatching a frugal supper, were busily engaged in discussing the events of the day while munching their bread and onions.

Both of them had attended the examination, and having been careful to be early on the ground had secured good places so as to be able to see and hear all that passed.

"They will a-hang him, sure," the Italian remarked, "and we will not a-finger ze five hundred dollars reward; it is bad, but he was not ze game I was after. Ze Frenchman was ze man I a-picked out."

"He didn't do it," growled the tramp, who was not in a good humor. He had not been in the best of spirits before, but since the trial he had grown terribly morose.

"No, no, they have got ze right man now, and they will make him dance upon notting soon."

"Mebbe they will, but he never did the trick."

"Oh, yes; no doubt!"

"But there is a doubt, and a mighty big one, too, and I hadn't a suspicion that he was in the land of the living until to-day," blurted out Johnny Roach, his face gloomy, and his thoughts evidently far away.

Although the boy was not apparently watching him, yet, in reality, there was not the slightest expression on the tramp's face that escaped him.

"Who you a-speak of, eh—some old friend you did not expect to see?"

The question, though put in the most innocent manner, recalled Johnny Roach to himself.

"Never you mind w'at I was a-saying!" he exclaimed, roughly. "I've got a queer way of talking to myself, once in awhile. Say, 'ain't you got some blunt to stand a drink? My throat is as dry as an ash-heap."

The boy laughed.

"All you think of is ze whisky."

"It's the only thing that keeps me alive."

"I am what you call broke—"

"That's disgusting!"

"But I cracked a crib last night; no money, but plenty brandy!"

"Aha, now you are getting interesting! Where is it?"

"Hid in an old house up ze river road. You like to take a nip of brandy, eh? Come along with me."

The tramp accepted the invitation with alacrity, and the two immediately set out.

The Italian led his companion direct to the old cabin where the encounter between the bravo and "Monsieur Houma" had taken place.

Few words were exchanged between the two on the road, but after they had entered the cabin, and the old fellow had examined it—which thanks to the rays of the moon streaming in through the window, he was able to do as well as though it was broad daylight—he exclaimed:

"Well, blow me! if this ain't as neat a little crib as I ever see'd! No one would think of looking for plun'er in here."

"Oh, yes; it is very good," and then from under a pile of rubbish in one corner of the cabin the Italian produced a couple of bottles of brandy.

The eyes of the old tramp sparkled.

"Aha! that's the stuff!"

"Ab! diavolo! I did not think to bring a cup!"

"W'at's the difference? I reckon a thirsty man kin drink out of anything. Durn y'r cup! I'm good for anything that has got good brandy in it from the neck of a bottle to the bung of a barrel!"

"So am I! diavolo! I would drink good brandy out of an iron pot!"

"Me allee same, too!" responded the tramp, with a grin, clearly proving by the expression that at some time in his wandering life he had rubbed against a "heathen Chinee."

Then the two squatted on the floor, the

Italian pushed one of the bottles over to his companion and the drinking bout began.

Corkscrews were lacking but the facility with which Johnny Roach decapitated the bottle with the back of the blade of a heavy clasp-knife which he took from his pocket, clearly proved that it was not the first time he had performed the trick, and the Italian made a remark to that effect.

"Oh, bless you! I learned the dodge when I was a student at college, only it used to be champagne bottles, then—champagne, the regular fiz at a half a guinea a pop, my boy! You wouldn't think it to look at me now, would ye?"

"Indeed I should not; but, here's luck!" remarked the boy, putting the bottle to his lips.

"Same to you, young hoss!" and the tramp took a generous dram of the potent fluid, and stronger brandy he had never tasted.

"Whew! If this ain't the stuff to warm up the cockles of a man's heart, you kin take all I have got!"

"Oh, it is good!" and again the Italian took a swallow, the tramp watching him with a great deal of interest.

"Well, you must have a cast-iron throat to pour it down that way," he observed; "I thought I was pretty well seasoned but you go ahead of my time."

"I have drank brandy ever since I can remember. *Diavolo!* I think I was weaned on it."

"Very likely!" and then Roach took another swig.

"Oh, it warms one like fire," the Italian said, patting the bottle gently as though it had been a living thing.

"Mighty strong stuff," replied the other, a sleepy expression appearing on his face and his tongue beginning to get tangled up. "I'll be hanged if I don't feel like going to sleep; I never had a couple of drinks fix me this way, afore; I say—you—you—" and then, with a grunt, the tramp laid over on his side and soon became quite insensible.

But it was not sleep that had fallen upon him; the tramp had been "huccussed"—the brandy was drugged. The tramp had been trapped.

CHAPTER XL.

A PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT.

THE Italian watched the old tramp as closely as a cat would a mouse upon whom she designed to feast.

"At last!" he muttered, with an air of intense satisfaction. "Now then, Monsieur Johnny Roach, you will speak, or I will know the reason why!"

There was a world of meaning in the quiet tones, and if the tramp had overheard the sentence, no doubt it would not have conducted to his peace of mind.

The boy went to the door of the cabin and looked out upon the moonlit country.

Not a soul was in sight—not a sound in the air to denote life of any kind in the neighborhood.

Certain preparations the Italian went through, and in about an hour the old tramp awoke from his unnatural slumber. As he opened his eyes and looked around him in amazement he found that he had been dragged over to one corner and propped up against the walls in a sitting posture. He was bound hand and foot, and so, securely that he could not move a single limb to save his life.

In amazement, utterly unable to comprehend this adventure, he looked around him. His gaze fell upon the Italian, squatted like a huge toad in the center of the apartment, the moonlight streaming in full upon him.

Before the Italian was a small portable furnace, such as is generally used by traveling tinkers, and a soldering iron inserted in the furnace was slowly heating, the Italian watching the operation with great interest.

"See hyer, what is the meaning of this, anyway?" he demanded.

"Say! do you not think we will make good partners?" asked the other, abruptly.

"Oh, yes, I guess so," replied the old tramp, unable to fathom the Italian's meaning.

"Very good partners, I think—very good thing for you. I find the shelter and the food, and you do the sleeping and the eating. I pay and you enjoy, hey?"

The tramp stared in a sulky sort of way at the speaker. It was the truth and he could not deny it.

"I am not satisfied! Oh, no! I have worked for you; is it not time now that you should work for me?" the Italian demanded.

"Well, I am willing to do the fair thing," the tramp growled, considerably alarmed by the position in which he found himself; and there was a peculiar look in the eyes of the Italian which he did not like; it meant mischief, he felt sure.

"Yes, yes, I know that, but I want to make sure," the other replied, giving the soldering iron a vicious poke.

"You young whelp! w'ot do you mean by treating me in this hyer way?" cried old Johnny, in a rage. "W'ot do you mean by getting me

drunk and then trussing me up like a cussed chicken?"

The Italian laughed, and a deal of malice there was in his laugh, too—malice that fairly made the old tramp shiver.

"W'ot do ye mean by grinning at a feller in that way, you hyena?" demanded Roach, decidedly uncomfortable in mind.

"So I got you drunk, eh?"

"I s'pose so."

"You are a bigger fool than I thought. Haven't you drank liquor enough in your life to detect the difference between the stupor produced by liquor, and that which comes from a drug?"

"I thought so—I guessed, you infernal whelp, that you had huccussed me!"

"You guessed right; I cannot afford to fool with you all my days. I have spent much money on you, and now I must have some of it back," the Italian replied, in the coolest possible manner, and he rattled the iron up and down in the furnace again.

Roach looked at the boy and watched his management of the soldering iron for a moment, a puzzled expression upon his face; then, all of a sudden, he broke out into a loud laugh.

"And so, you cunning imp of Satan! you decoyed me here and huccussed me for the purpose of making a stake out of me, eh? and you think you are smart, maybe."

"Oh, yes," responded the other, placidly, paying much more attention to the furnace and the iron which was now at a red heat than to the prisoner.

"You won't make nary stake out of me, for all of your smartness. You kin go through me all you like, and if you kin scare up more'n a quarter you're welcome to it."

"Oh, I know that; I have been through your clothes two or three times when you were asleep."

"The blazes you have!" growled the old tramp, in disgust.

"A flea would starve on the pickings from a dozen like you, but I know how to make money out of you."

"You do!" cried the tramp, in wonder.

"Oh, yes," and the Italian drew the red-hot iron from the furnace and flourished it in the air, and so near the face of the tramp that the heat affected him unpleasantly.

"Say! w'ot are you 'bout?" he growled. "Keep that durned thing away! Do you want to burn the nose off of me?"

"No, no, not the nose; that would not do any good."

There was a sort of implied threat in the speech which made the old tramp shiver. His face turned all sorts of colors.

"For Heaven's sake tell me w'ot you are going to do."

"Fix you so that you can earn money," the other replied, in the most matter-of-fact way. "What good are you now? No good! But I will fix you so that we can travel together as pals and pick up a fortune."

"You diabolical scoundrel!" cried Roach, in an agony of fear and rage.

"It is so simple; it will not take but a minute, and the pain—well, it may pain a little, but it will not last long," and again the Italian thrust the hot iron so near the face of the miserable old tramp that his skin was nearly blistered.

Roach groaned in horror and vainly struggled against the bonds which confined him.

The Italian laughed.

"Oh, I have bound you tightly; I thought you might be foolish enough to object to the proceeding; men in this world seldom know what is good for them. Your eyes haven't done you much good—"

"My eyes!" screamed the old tramp, in deadly terror.

"Yes, I am going to put them out with this hot iron—"

"Oh, mercy! mercy!"

"You'll make plenty of money as a blind man, and I will lead you around and take care of you."

"For Heaven's sake spare me!"

"How else can I get back the money that I have spent on you?" demanded the other, indignantly. "I offered you a chance but you would not have it."

"Spare me and I will do anything!"

"Give me something to work on then so I can get the five hundred dollars reward offered for the murderer of Mrs. Esperance!"

"I don't know anything 'bout it!"

"You lie!" and in order to give due emphasis to the accusation the speaker thrust the hot iron so near to the face that the old vagabond screamed in mortal terror. "You had the diamonds! Bah! did you think you fooled me by pretending to find the diamond in the street which you tried to sell? Oh, no; I am not so easily led astray as that. It was a cunning dodge, but I was up to you in a moment. And that was the reason why you almost fainted when you discovered that the stone was a false one; you had all the rest, and you thought you had a fortune in your grasp."

"So help me Heaven! I don't know who did the trick."

"You know more than you are willing to tell, but you shall speak or else I will make a nice blind man of you," and again the speaker scorched the face of the old tramp with the hot iron until he roared in agony.

"Spare me and I will tell you all I know, but it won't do you any good, for though I was right on the spot, and almost saw the trick done, I can't tell you who did it."

"You can tell me enough, perhaps, to put me on the right scent."

"Blast me! if I don't believe you are a detective!" exclaimed Reach, suddenly, the idea just occurring to him.

"You are right; I am, and now speak!"

And speak the old tramp did, and a most wonderful story he told—not a very long one, but directly to the point, and at its end over the face of the secret agent, who as the reader probably has guessed was no other than La Marmoset, came a gleam of triumph.

"At last I am on the track!" she cried.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE RIGHT ONE AT LAST.

JUST two hours after the time the revelation of the tramp to La Marmoset was made a strange scene took place in the mansion of Judge Clairborne in New Orleans.

The judge was in his library, seated at his desk, busily writing, when the door of the apartment—which he had not taken the precaution to lock—opened suddenly and the young man, who looked like a Creole, and who called himself Felix Houma, entered the room.

The judge looked around and when he caught sight of the intruder seemed to be both amazed and annoyed.

He had been engaged in writing for some time and his desk was littered up with the pages which as fast as he finished them he pushed to one side in heedless confusion.

Resting his arm upon his desk he had wheeled around and confronted the intruder.

"Well, sir, what is the meaning of this intrusion?" he demanded, sternly.

"You remember me, judge?" asked Houma, not at all abashed by the cool reception.

"I do, sir."

"Possibly you have wondered at the interest I have manifested in this Esperance case?"

"I have not troubled my head about the matter at all."

"Perhaps not," responded the other, very dryly, "but you will understand why I have been interested when I say that I am a detective."

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me."

"You are wrong, sir; you are deeply interested."

"I understand; you refer to my son; but he is innocent, sir, and time will show it."

"That is exactly what I have come to say; and more—I think I have discovered the real criminal!"

"That is good news, indeed!" cried Clairborne, warmly, but at the same time gazing at the other with searching eyes as though he doubted the truth of the statement.

"I am afraid you will not think so when you learn upon whom my suspicion rests."

"Explain, sir, at once, I beg."

"I have secured possession of a glove, stained with blood and with the marks of human teeth upon it; also a bridle rein spotted with the same crimson fluid, and can prove by competent witnesses that the owner of the glove, disguised, was in the neighborhood of the Esperance plantation on the night of the murder, and that she had good cause to wish to be revenged upon the rival who had supplanted her in the affections of the man for whose love she thirsted, for

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!"

The judge laughed contemptuously.

"Well, Mr. Detective, you are not a master of your trade if you think Miss Lauderdale is guilty, for this glove and rein story is not new to me. As the master of this house all idle gossip soon comes to my ears, and I immediately sifted the matter. I questioned the lady herself and she, finding that her wild adventure was known, confessed all. She was not in love with my son, as I had supposed all along; but, on the contrary, was devotedly attached to Colonel Terrebonne, and when she was told that he was paying attention to Mrs. Esperance her jealousy and rage were unbounded. In disguise she resolved to watch them and learn the truth for herself, and that was why she, in male attire, was in the neighborhood of the plantation on the night of the murder. She saw a love passage between the man whom she idolized and this bold, bad woman, and her anger was so great that she could only prevent herself from giving vent to her rage in words by thrusting her hand into her mouth, and in her excitement she bit it until the blood came. That is the whole truth in a nutshell."

"I haven't the least doubt that it is the truth, and since you are so clever in explaining mysteries, will you tell me where I can find the man who was with Mrs. Esperance on the night of the murder—who entered her apartment by means of a secret stairway which was reached

by a door right at the head of the bed, and who, after the murder was done, escaped from the house by the same means—the man who was evidently on the most familiar terms with his victim—the man who, years ago in Paris, was known as the Gay American, and who committed what was believed to be a murder at the time, for her sake, and on that account was forced to fly?"

"This is a romance, evidently!" exclaimed the judge, plainly showing his astonishment.

"Oh, no; I have a witness who saw the scene—one of the husbands of this much-married lady—the man who was supposed to have been killed by the Gay American in Paris on this woman's account, now a wretched old tramp. He was outside in the garden, lurking in the neighborhood for the purpose of getting money from the adventuress who had wrecked his life, but was now flaunting it so bravely upon the money of some other fool whom she had either coaxed or forced into pandering to her whims. Through the window he saw the disguised man enter the room and heard this female fiend address him as the Gay American. Then the tragedy followed; the woman drank a glass of wine; it was drugged, and as she struggled with insensibility the murderer struck her; then, alarmed by her scream, he fled through the secret door. The guests entered the room; the murder was discovered; the proposition was made to search the garden. The tramp at once perceived the peril that he was in; if he was found he surely would be accused of committing the deed; one way of escape only was open to him: the chamber wherein lay the dead woman was deserted; by means of the veranda without the tramp gained access to the apartment, and from the body stole the diamond necklace—diamonds as he supposed, but which were only clever imitations, for the Gay American, ruined by the siren who held the threat of exposure over him, in order to raise money had substituted false stones for the true ones, and before the murder occurred had disposed of them, one by one, in a dozen different places. After possessing himself of the necklace, it was easy enough for the old tramp to escape from the house by means of the secret staircase. I am no botch at my business, as you will own when you know all. You have been in Paris often: did you ever hear of La Marmoset?"

The judge gave a start.

"I am she, and also—Mrs. General Calhoun at your service!"

Clairborne turned deadly pale.

"I have weaved the web around you so strongly that there is not a single mesh through which you can break. You, Judge Clairborne, are the Gay American; you are the man who tried to murder me by the Italian's aid; you are the assassin who killed Adeline Esperance!"

A fierce light shone in the judge's eyes, but in an instant the female spy had him "covered" with a cocked revolver.

"If you attempt resistance your blood be upon your own head!" she said.

A bitter laugh came from the judge's lips, and he settled back in his chair as though glad that the suspense was over.

"You are indeed a wonderful woman and every word you have said is true. That woman was the evil genius of my life. She followed me here to America, after years had elapsed, and by threatening me with a disclosure of the past made me her slave, but from the first I determined to break the bond by killing her, and from the very beginning I bent all my efforts to that end; her extravagance brought me to the brink of ruin, and her death alone could save me. You must not think, though, that I intended to let my son suffer for my crime. For years I have striven to bring about a match between him and Miss Lauderdale, simply because I have used up nearly all of her fortune and dreaded discovery. These pages contain my confession," and he pointed to the papers upon the desk. "To-night I should have been on the road to the wilds of the West, and in two days more this confession would have been in the hands of the district attorney; but, thanks to you, I am spared that trouble, but to die upon the scaffold will be bitter indeed!"

And as he finished the speech he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands.

It was really pitiful to witness the distress of this strong man; even the stern bloodhound of the law hesitated to disturb him.

But for once in her life La Marmoset was to be baffled of her prey.

The despair was feigned; the position was assumed simply to cover the conveyance to the mouth of a capsule of poison which he had managed to take from his vest pocket.

He raised his head, death's seal already upon his face, and laughed!

"No handcuffs for me—no prison cell, rope or scaffold!" he gasped. "See justice done my boy; let Philippa marry the man of her heart. I have no fear of the future, for, though I took a human life, I give my own in return, and the avenging hand of justice should have stricken that vile woman, who has wrecked so many lives, years and years ago."

The utterance of the speech was the last exertion of Clairborne's powerful will. Hardly

had the last word left his lips, when his eyes became glassy, his strength failed, the breath came short and thick, and in a moment more Judge Erasmus Clairborne had "joined the majority."

With the revelation of the mystery our task is done.

Of course La Marmoset exerted herself as much to procure the release of the innocent prisoner as she had done to hunt down the guilty party.

The facts of the case never got out, for the confession left by the judge was given into the hands of the district attorney, and with the delicacy common to the high-toned Southern gentleman, he concluded that no good end could be gained by making the matter public, and so smirching the good name of one of the oldest and most honored of all Southern families.

Even Raymond never knew all, although when he came to settle up his father's affairs he was astounded to discover that the estate would hardly pay the debts.

To Philippa Mrs. Calhoun made known the judge's last words in regard to her, and now that all obstacles were removed, it did not take long for the lovely girl and gallant Lance Terrebonne to find out that they were all the world to each other.

The two tramps, both of whom had enjoyed the favor of the adventuress at one time, disappeared, and rumor said they went North in company, bound for more congenial regions.

The most astonished man was the Briton, Sir John, whose money had contributed so greatly to solving the riddle.

When he discovered, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that the woman whom he had esteemed an angel was much nearer a devil, he shook his head as he meditated upon the narrow escape which he had had.

"Women are a conundrum, and I give 'em up," he muttered.

And La Marmoset?

She still lives, and at some future time we may relate a few more chapters from the life of this marvel of her sex.

THE END.

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